

The Miraculous Life of Gotama Buddha

A study in the psychology of mythology
of the historical Bodhisattva

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SD 52.1
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by

Piya Tan

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THE MERE BUDDHIST VISION. We aspire to learn, teach and practise mere Buddha Dharma, or "non-religious Buddhism," that is, Buddhism as simple as possible, as the teaching of the historical Buddha, so that it is open to all who seek true stillness and liberating wisdom. We aspire to compassionately and joyfully proclaim the possibility, necessity and urgency of gaining spiritual liberation in this life itself—at least as streamwinners, with or without dhyana—in keeping with the spirit of the Okkanta Saṃyutta (S 25). ***Mere Buddhism is easy: live it and be free.***

PREFACE

“The Miraculous Life of Gotama Buddha” was originally meant to be simply the first chapter of SD 52 which is themed “Parables 2” (“Parables 1” is the theme of SD 28). Before the writing of this chapter began, I had to decide the range of the topic. As I thought about this, I realized that there are much more miraculous aspects of the Buddha’s life before the great awakening than *after* it. [1.1] Hence, I decided the limit this essay to examining Gotama’s life from his sojourn in Tusita to the great awakening.

As the writing progressed, it became apparent that this essay will become a volume in itself, that is, as **SD 52.1**. Considering the significance of the title, it deserves a special sustained study in its own right. This decision is also reinforced by the fact that there are very few scholarly studies regarding the significance of the miraculous aspects of the Buddha’s life [1.0]. The available studies tend to take either of two extreme approach: either a wholesome deferent analysis of the miraculous elements or a modernist skeptical, approach to downplay the miraculous. In short, the miraculous elements in the Buddha’s life remains to be more carefully and fully examined and explained. This is the main purpose of this volume.

Basically, this study is mainly based on **the Nidāna,kathā** (Buddhaghosa’s introduction to his commentary of the Jātaka stories), that is, the chapter known as “the intermediate account” (*avidūre,-nidāna*). This chapter, in fact, conveniently covers the purview of this book, that is, an account of the Bodhisattva’s sojourn in Tusita to his great awakening as the Buddha. Alongside this commentarial work, I have also used relevant sections of Buddhadatta’s **Buddha,vaṃsa Commentary**. [1.0(5)]

Wherever possible, I have analyzed the narrative or topic against related **suttas** and teachings. In this, I am inspired by the teaching of **the Neyy’attha Nī’tattha Sutta** (A 2.3.5+6) [1.4.2.3]. Whatever is not explicitly Dhamma (such as figures and stories), I treat as having a mythical significance [1]. Hence, there is an emphasis on mythology, especially a psychology of early Buddhist mythology [16.2.5.1].

Ultimately, of course, the who purpose of this study is to help us have a better understanding of the Buddha’s life. This, in turn, should inspire us in the study and practice of the Buddha Dhamma. As we better understand the miraculous life of the Buddha, we see that this is the language of spirituality that pervades our own lives. When we see this vital link, then we are drawn closer to being buddha-like, so that we move further and faster on the path of awakening.

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We should all deeply indebted, as I am, to all those diligent proof-readers who have toiled to give a readable book. Whatever errors that may remain are mine entirely.

The book-cover is the work of **Veron LIEN** of Lien Studio (www.facebook.com/lienstudiosg).

As always, I thankfully rejoice in the dedication of my wife, Ratna LIM, to our full-time Dharma work, which has made many projects possible on account of her unstinting effort and skills.

I also thank the various proof-readers who have diligently and expertly uplift the quality of this work.

This publication—*Miraculous Life of Gotama Buddha*—is to celebrate Vesak, Buddha Day, 2018.

Piya Tan

Vesak, 29 May 2018

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The Miraculous Life of Gotama Buddha

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1.0 [PREAMBLE](#)

1.0.1 [Sources of the Buddha's biography](#)

1.0.1.1 The oldest sources of the Buddha's life are found in the early Canon (the 4 Nikāyas). Around these early stories, grew a mythic drama of cosmic proportions. Etienne Lamotte, in his magnum opus, *History of Indian Buddhism* (translated by Sara Webb-Boin, 1988:648-682), proposes 5 successive stages in the development of the Buddha legend:

- (1) Biographical fragments incorporated into the Sūtras: **Ariya,pariyesanā Sutta** (M 1:163-73), **Dvedhā,-vitakka Sutta** (M 1:117), **Bhaya,bherava Sutta** (M 1:17-23) and **Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 1:240-9). The **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 2:72-168) is entirely devoted to the last days of the Buddha.
- (2) Biographical fragments incorporated into the Vinaya: the **Skandhaka** (*P khandhaka*) of the Theravāda (V 1:1-44), the Mahīśāsaka (T1421.101a10-110c10) and the Dharma,guptaka (T1428.779a5-779b24).
- (3) Autonomous but incomplete "Lives." Towards the beginning of the Common Era, the life of the Buddha became more prominent than the doctrine and discipline. Two Sanskrit works have survived: **the Mahāvastu** (ed E Senart, Paris, 1892-97) and **the Lalita,vistara** (ed S Lefmann, Halle, 1902).
- (4) Complete lives of the Buddha. Only in the 2nd century, do we see complete biographies of the Buddha (from Tusita through to his parinirvāṇa and funeral rites). These were the works of king Kanishka's contemporaries: by Saṅgharakṣa of Śurāṣṭra and by Aśvaghōṣa of Sāketa, both entitled **Buddhacarita** [2.2.1.21]. A third complete Buddha biography in verse extant only in a Chinese translation, 佛本行經 *Fó běn xíng jīng*¹ (T193) translated by Pao Yün (寶雲 Bǎo yún) (Liu Song dynasty, between 427-449).
- (5) Sinhalese compilations. The Sinhalese preserved ancient Pali Commentaries on the Pali Canon (5th century). Of these, Buddhaghosa's **Nidāna,kathā**, the introduction to the Jātaka Commentary, which gives an account of the Buddha from the time of his birth as Sumedha right up to the donation of Jetavana to the Sangha. Buddhaghosa's contemporary, Buddhadatta (southern India), in his **Commentary to the Buddha,vaṃsa**, lists 30 important episodes comprising the Buddha's life² and also compiled accounts of **the first 20 years** of the Buddha's ministry (BA 3). A list of major events of the first 20 years (especially where the Buddha spends his rains-retreat) is also given by Buddhaghosa (AA 2:125).
- (6) The Siamese Buddhist tradition produced at least two classics in the Buddha's biography. The life of the Buddha is treated in full (up to the times the Lanna kingdom in northern Thailand) in the **Jina,-kāla,mālī** (Jink 29-35), a 16th-century Siamese work by Ratanapaññā of Chiangmai, Thailand.³ The second Siamese biography of the Buddha is **Pathamasambodhi** (Thai, *pathomsompho:d*) by Somdet Paramanujit Jinorasa (1790-1853) (Bangkok, 1845). [13.2.2.2]

¹ Wade-Giles *Fo pen hsing jing*, "The discourse on the Buddha's original acts."

² BA 298 f; cf Lamotte, 1988: 405.

³ Prob completed in 1528 (Be 2071) (Jink:J xxxii). However, the only extant MS (in Khmer) that we have is dated 1788.

1.0.1.2 The Western academic study of Indian Buddhism began in earnest in the 19th century, during the Victorian period, when little was known about the age and historicity of the small amount of literature then available. As such, some scholars naturally tended to be skeptical of the historical worth of their sources. Thus, the French scholar, Emile Senart, in his “Essai sur la légende du Buddha” (1873-75), claimed that the Buddha was a myth. Accounts of the Buddha’s life were seen as transformations of pre-Buddhist myths of a solar god.⁴

Senart did not deny the possibility that reliable historical information about the Buddha had been preserved, but his approach effectively minimised such concerns. The Dutch scholar, Hendrick Kern, soon after him, went on to completely deny the existence of the historical Buddha.⁵

Against this scepticism, British scholar, Thomas William Rhys Davids, in his *Buddhism, being a sketch of the life and teachings of Gautama the Buddha* (1877), defended the historicity of the Buddha as presented in the then unpublished Pali texts.⁶ With the foundation of **the Pali Text Society** (London) in 1881 by Rhys Davids “to foster and promote the study of Pāli texts,” the study of early Buddhism grew in earnest.

In recent times, the trend of extreme skepticism similar to that of Senart and Kern resurfaced, such as in the works of Gregory Schopen (1997:3). Such an innovative trend rested mainly on the curiously narrow assumption “that we cannot know anything about early Buddhism because all the manuscripts are late is vacuous, and made, I assume, by those who had not studied the textual material thoroughly.” (Wynne, 2005:66).

1.0.1.3 Donald K Swearer thinks that the Buddhist holy sites had a role in the formation of the Buddha-legend, too: “The narrative brings together episodes from the life of the Buddha found in the Pali Canon, such as his awakening and his post-awakening teaching, with cycles of legends that had probably developed around major Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India.” (Swearer, 1995:419)

1.0.2 A psychology of mythology

1.0.2.1 What is a **myth**? We can understand or work with myths in 3 ways and 2 aspects, that is, as (1) symbolic language; (2) maturational narrative; (3) a descriptive or objective of communication; (4) an inner experience and connection; and (5) demythologization.

(1) First, myth is the use of **symbolic language** or literary representation to express some higher truth or reality, or even the supermundane or spiritual in terms of the mundane or worldly. There is a here significant usage of analogy, simile, parable, story and “intentional language.”⁷ “Symbolic language” is the basis for our analyzing and synthesizing—examining the parts and seeing them as a functional whole—in terms of human thought and behaviour, especially in the individual and individuation.

This is, in essence, a **Buddhist psychology of myth**, which I take to refer to an analysis of Buddhist story-telling and spiritual experience—which is an aspect, a vital one, of the broader “Buddhist psychology of mythology” [16.2.5.1] However, to fully appreciate the value of such an approach, we need to understand what is communicated or expressed in the mythical narrative [see (2) below] and how it is communicated or expressed [see (3) below].

⁴ See eg de Jong 1974:76 f.

⁵ Kern, 1881 = vol 1; de Jong, 1974:79-81 (1975:24-28).

⁶ Rhys Davids, 1877:15-17; 1899 (D:RD 1):ix-xvi; 1903:163-175. For his views on Senart, 1877:190-193. Hermann Oldenberg (1881) also rejected Senart’s solar theory (de Jong, 1974:81 = 1975:28 f).

⁷ On “intentional language,” see SD 26.11 (6.5); **Dh 97** @ SD 10.6 esp (5).

(2) Second, myth is a **descriptive or “objective” means for communicating or expressing in form or content** (that is, generally or specifically). In “form,” for example, refers to how the various aspects of mythical elements of the Bodhisattva’s life connect to one another’ in “content” means those particular aspects of the mythical elements functioning in themselves.

Also “form” refers to a kind of universal sense of an idea or theme (such as the Bodhisattva’s purity or other-worldliness, while “content” refers to a specific sense or application of a mythical element (such as the newborn Bodhisattva taking 7 steps).

Yet, a myth is able to raise our awareness or feelings, or both, beyond the descriptive or objective to address, to challenge, to transform, or at least inspire or move us with some sense of faith and joy. The real purpose of myth, then, is not to present an objective picture or narrative of the world, but to incite an understanding of ourself and the world in which we live.

(3) Third, myth is **the natural narrative** of a primitive, pre-scientific, view of the world and the self. The cosmology of the Pali canon, for example, is essentially mythical in character. Our world was viewed as a flat disc with its 4 major continents and great oceans, located in some kind of solar system or a universe with an axis mundi. Basically, the world of beings (*satta, loka*) was a three-storeyed structure, with the earth in the middle with the heavens above all and all around, and the underworld (the sub-human planes, excluding the animal realm) either subterranean or in the interworld void (“black holes”?)

Karma and rebirth entail a complicated working of natural causal conditions, but we have the ability to influence their workings with proper knowledge and training. To that extent, this process may be said to be “scientific.” However, because karma and rebirth cannot be palpably proven or evidential, there are difficulties in considering them as being “scientific.”

This 3rd way of understanding *myth* in Buddhism is to see how we saw our world *then*, and how we see it *now*. The form (functional appearance) may be different, but the contents (functional details) are essentially the same—they reflect the impermanence and unsatisfactoriness of all our activities, human and divine, and the non-self of the principles underlying them.

(4) The Buddha or the Dharma (P *dhamma*) are ideally neither an “agent” nor an “object” about whom discourse occurs (we don’t really progress spiritually by merely talking about them). Rather, discourse (beneficial or transformative expression) flows from a deepening understanding and experience of either of them. The Dharma is not “beyond” us but an inner world or reality we have yet to explore, conquer and liberate.

Hence, mythical language can be helpful in avoiding or transcending “subjectifying” language (which proliferates thoughts) about the Buddha, the arhat or even human persons, but to deconstruct our conceptions and preconceptions of them. Hence, we are free of views, and so able to see true reality. A myth, simply put, is **an inner experience** of true reality and connection with it.

(5) Demythologization is essentially the drawing out, or clarifying, the eternal truth or universal reality in what is expressed culturally, historically or even temporally. In an important sense, it is about recovering or elucidating “the point” about religious language, such as a particular myth (the ancient royal lineage of the Sakyas), or mythic narrative (the Bodhisattva’s life from birth to awakening),⁸ or mythic process (a social sanction, like the brahminical caste system).

However, demythologizing should not be so heavily weighed down by a false linguistic dualism between description (history) and evaluation (change). The nature and process of history should be understood in terms of human thought and conduct, and to appreciate the multi-layered, multi-functional character of language in religion. For example, when dealing with the mythology of the brahminical caste

⁸ This is, in fact, the purview of **The miraculous life of Gotama Buddha** (SD 52.1).

system, we should also understand how its underlying narrative may still function in our own society or Buddhist community today.⁹

(6) *The Miraculous Life of Gotama Buddha* (SD 52.1) examines the life and events of the historical Bodhisattva from just before his birth to just before the great awakening (when he becomes the Buddha) from the perspective of a psychology of myth [see (1) above], what the mythical narrative communicates [see (2) above], and how it is communicated [see (3) above].

The other details have been stated in the main section of the Preface.

1.0.3 This essay is in 3 parts:

Part 1, “Seeing the Dharma”—the theoretical background of our study—we will examine and define the key terms and ideas, such as myth, legend and miracle. [1]

Part 2, “Seeing the Buddha,” we will examine aspects of the Bodhisattva's life from his conception up to his awakening. [2-17]

Part 3, “After the Buddha,” is both an overview of the study as well as its conclusion. [18]

I

SEEING THE DHARMA

Yo dhammaṃ passati, so maṃ passati
Who sees Dharma sees me¹⁰

1 Myth and miracle

1.1 SCOPE OF STUDY

1.1.1 As a mental (some may say “intellectual”) preparation for our study of the miraculous life of the Buddha, let us have some idea of the difference between a “myth” and a “miracle.” It is helpful to limit our task to the study of the topic at hand, without discussing any “general theory of Buddhist myth”¹¹ or any “specific theory of Buddhist myth.”¹² Here, our studies are to help us better understand the suttas, which is to inspire us to meditate to reach the path of awakening in this life itself.¹³

1.1.2 In the essay on “**Miracles**” (SD 27.5a), we examine “what a miracle is not” (section 1) and “what is a miracle?” (section 4). These form a helpful background to our study here. Hence, it helps to at least read these 2 sections—or better, read the whole of **SD 27.5a**—before studying this.

⁹ On demythologization, see SD 4.1 (3); SD 39.3 (3.3.4.3). For an idea of the Christian notions of “myth” and “demythologization,” see A C Thiselton, *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford: OneWorld, 2002, sv demythologizing, demythologization.

¹⁰ **Vakkali S** (S 22.87,13), SD 8.8; SD 51.24 (2.5.2.1); SD 51.25 (2.2.2.6). Cf “who sees dependent arising,” see SD 6.16 (5).

¹¹ A general theory of Buddhist myth, SD 36.1 (3).

¹² A specific theory of Buddhist myth, SD 36.1 (4).

¹³ For a better understanding of “myth” here, see **Myth in Buddhism**, SD 36.1 & SD 49.8 (9.1.3); **The Buddha as myth**, SD 36.2; see also SD 2.19 (1); SD 51.11 (3.1.1).

1.1.3 In this essay, we will examine “**the miraculous life of Gotama Buddha**”—that is, the extraordinary events and their symbolism in the Buddha’s life from his conception up to his renunciation. The first reason for framing our study around this window of events is simply because this part of life of **the Bodhisattva** (“a being bound for awakening,” the Buddha-to-be) is filled with *miraculous and mythical details*.

A study of these miracles and myths helps us better understand how the early Buddhists see the Buddha or his life. This forms a helpful basis for us to then understand what kind of person or being the Buddha is himself as we study the suttas, especially when the teachings are related to this window on the Bodhisattva, that is, before his awakening.

1.1.4 The second reason—or rather explanation—is because *after the Buddha’s awakening*, we have a better historical idea of him as the *discoverer* of the noble eightfold path that leads to nirvana and liberation, and simply as a *person* we can emulate or even become, if we choose to.¹⁴

1.1.5 The basic narrative used in this essay is based on that of **the Jātaka Nidāna** (cited as J *vol:page*), the introduction to the Jātaka commentary (attributed to Buddhaghosa). More specifically, this is the “intermediate account” (*avidūre nidāna*, “not-too-distant origins”), which relates the life of the Bodhisattva from his sojourn in Tusita to his great awakening as the Buddha (J 1:47-77). The whole of the Jātaka Nidāna has been translated by N A Jayawickrama.¹⁵

1.2 DEFINITIONS

1.2.1 A definition of “myth”

1.2.1.1 For the purposes of our appreciating the miraculous in the Buddha’s life, it is helpful for us to first understand what a “**myth**” is. As a working definition, we can say that a **myth** is a story that is bigger than we are, lasts longer than we do, and reflects what lies deep in our minds and hearts, our desires, dislikes and delusions.¹⁶

The best known usage of “myth” is in terms of the ancient Greek and Roman stories of their gods, non-humans and heroes, which are at the roots of western civilization even before Christianity forced itself on the scene. They are called “legends” [1.2.2] although these mythical characters are, as a rule, *not historical persons*.

However, in many of these myths, their key characters are often linked to kings, heroes and people from known places. But the roles they play or their “fates” are beyond those of any normal humans. Moreover, we can easily identify with any of these characters or their actions, or see some human qualities reflected or “mythified” in them.

1.2.1.2 The term **myth** can be usefully applied to the life of **the historical Bodhisattva**—the Buddha before his awakening—for 2 reasons. The first reason is that these stories are so ancient, it is difficult, even impossible, for us to historically verify them. Accounts of these events are found only in our suttas and commentaries without any other external evidence to show that they are historical events—that they actually happened the way they are described there.

¹⁴ A related reading here is Thomas 1949:1-3.

¹⁵ N A Jayawickrama (tr), *The Story of Gotama Buddha: The Nidāna-kathā of the Jātakaṭṭhakathā*. Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1990.

¹⁶ For a more comprehensive lexical def, see SD 36.1 (2.1).

Secondly, most of the events and stories related to the Bodhisattva are of such a miraculous and fantastic nature that they are not applicable to any other human, certainly not to us. However, like the Greek and Roman myths, we can relate to them as dramatizing or elevating our very human conditions to a heroic, divine or cosmic level—especially regarding the vicissitudes and misfortunes of life.

In this mythology, **the Bodhisattva** is the pure-hearted hero in quest of the good. On a higher level, he is in quest of the spiritual happiness and liberation of all beings. His antagonists (such as Devadatta and Māra) are often the manifestation of evil or bad extremes, that is, of lust, hate and delusion.

1.2.1.3 We can thus understand **myth** as “a universal narrative of the human condition and the realities they point to—often with a common moral or universal theme.”¹⁷ A **fable**, on the other hand, is a universal narrative of the human condition often with a personal moral—the truths that they point to. When we understand the realities of the human condition, we have a better understanding of the meaning of life. When we see the truth of a narrative or reality, we are moved with the purpose of life.

Basically, a myth dramatizes or allegorizes the realities of life. The Bodhisattva sees the 3 bads or evils of life—an old man, a sick man and a dead man [4.4]—and when he is told that they will take away all that he has and loves, leaves his world behind to discover how to overcome these bads and evils.¹⁸

A fable brings a myth more down to earth with a purpose so that we see what we can learn from it or work its purpose. Instead of asking us to renounce the “world” (all that we have, all that we are), the Buddha uses the parables of the water-snake and of the raft to remind us to “**Let go of what is not yours!**” (*yaṃ na tumhākaṃ taṃ pajahatha*) in **the Alagaddûpama Sutta** (M 22).¹⁹ When parables are related or understood more fully as a story in itself, even briefly, but with a moral, it becomes a fable.

1.2.1.4 The Buddha’s life, then, is not a story to entertain us, but a **lesson** that is retold time and again, generation after generation. It is a reminder of things bigger and better than we are or want to be. The Buddha is willing to give up all that he has, all that he is, for something bigger. He succeeds in his great quest and discovers how to make the best of this world, and then to rise beyond even the impermanent gods in their impermanent heavens, to the boundless space of nirvana, the highest happiness that there is. This is truly the greatest story ever told—it is about us.

1.2.2 A definition of “legend”

1.2.2.1 The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) records the earliest usage of **legend** as meaning “the story of the life of a Saint” (c1375),²⁰ or “an unauthentic or non-historical story, esp[ecially] handed down by tradition from early times and popularly regarded as historical” (earliest recorded usage, 1613). The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines legend as “a story coming down from the past; especially one popularly regarded as historical although not verifiable” (Merriam-Webster).²¹

1.2.2.2 In simple terms, then, a legend is a traditional story,²² which, may, as a whole or in parts, be non-historical. The tradition that accepts such a legend may regard the story as historical, or may not be aware of the non-historical nature of the story, but they accept its authenticity. “Non-historical” here, in reference to Buddhism, is a broad term referring to the nature of the story, which may have mythical

¹⁷ See Penner 2009:113-122.

¹⁸ On the nature of mythology, see SD 51.11 (3.1.2).

¹⁹ M 22,40 + SD 3.13 (4.2): the parable of the water-snake (§11) and of the raft (§§12-14).

²⁰ This is the sense of “legend” as used by Geoffrey Chaucer, such as in his Nun’s Priest’s Tale (c1386).

²¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legend>.

²² For definitions of terms related to “traditional story,” see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional_story.

qualities or psychological undertones. Such legends are often indicators of their believers' values and hopes in their daily lives.²³

[1.2.3 The Buddha as legend](#)

1.2.3.1 After the Buddha's awakening—that is, Gotama as the Buddha—we can see him more as a real or historical individual. We see significantly less miraculous or fantastic accounts of the Buddha than we do of him as the Bodhisattva. Miracles and the extraordinary still abound in accounts of the Buddha, even in the suttas—such as his psychic powers,²⁴ his travels to and stays in the heavens,²⁵ meetings with gods and non-humans,²⁶ encounters with Māra the bad one (*pāpima*),²⁷ and even animals.²⁸

1.2.3.2 As a rule, most Buddhists, like most followers of the world religions (all of which are God-centred, except for Buddhism), generally accept their founders or key sacred figures—in our case, the Buddha—as being more than historical beings. It doesn't really matter to such Buddhist believers whether the Buddha existed or not. They are quite happy to simply know that there *is* the or a Buddha “somewhere” out there.

The historicity of the Buddha is therefore not an issue in **the Buddhism of faith**—they have a theology of cosmic Buddhas and celestial Bodhisattvas, whom they worship and who service them in ways little different from the way God-believers treat their God and angels. Even the historical Buddha is regarded as a mere “phantom” or projection of some kind of eternal essence known as the Dharma, kaya (“Dharma Body”), like the Godhead of theistic religions. Hence, we can say that they see the Buddha as what we would term a “legend,” a transhistorical Buddha with superhuman powers.

[1.3 APPRECIATING MYTHS](#)

[1.3.1 Taking myths as they are](#)

1.3.1.1 In our daily life of working, resting and socializing, we probably understand a “myth” to be *something imaginative and false*, not worth much consideration. The reason for this dismissive attitude is partly because we have no time for anything else other than our mundane pursuits at hand, and mainly because we simply do not know what “myths” really are, much less say something intelligent or useful about them.

However, when the tasks and routines we consider immediate and urgent to us do not yield the expected fruits or simply fall apart, we struggle to find answers and solutions. We have defined ourselves mainly by what we have or *will* have, but when we lose all or most of what we have, then what are we? We realize that we are nothing really. We begin to look for answers outside of ourselves.

1.3.1.2 The early Buddhist term for such a rude awakening is “**spiritual urgency**” (*saṃvega*)²⁹—like when the young Bodhisattva sees the first 3 sights of an old man, a sick man and a dead man, and is traumatized by the realities they point to. This is when we find ourselves in a quest (*esanā*): we look for explanations for our losses and failures. When we look hard enough, when we openly question ourselves

²³ On “a legendary life of the Buddha,” see SD 49.8b (9).

²⁴ On the Buddha's psychic powers (the 6 superknowledges), see SD 27.5a (5).

²⁵ On the Buddha's visit to Tāvātimsa: see **Nanda S** (U 3.2/23,6), SD 43.7.

²⁶ On the Buddha's interaction with yaksha, see SD 51.11 (3.1.1.2). On yakshas, see SD 21.3 (4.2.5).

²⁷ On Māra confronting the Buddha, see **Māra Saṃyutta** (S 4/1:103-127); **Māra**, SD 61.8; SD 51.11 (3.1.1).

²⁸ On the Buddha's connections with animals: elephant, SD 6.1 (3); frog, SD 36.2 (5.1.1.4); horse (Kaṅṭhaka), SD 55.3; monkey, SD 55.3; snake or serpent-spirit (Mucalinda), SD 27.5a (6.2.1.1).

²⁹ On *saṃvega*, see SD 1.11 (3); SD 9 (7.6).

and courageously accept the answers, we are likely to be confronted with mythical language and symbols.

At first, especially when we are not familiar with mythical language, we think we are speaking in riddles. Notice I am speaking in the first person—this is a crucial time when we need to confront ourself. This is also our most emotionally vulnerable time when we are most likely to become easy prey to devious and manipulative gurus.

1.3.1.3 However, as long as **we ask the right questions**, or at least define our key problems, the answers will somehow present themselves in surprising ways. This is when we are able to better relate to the mythical aspects of the Buddha's life: why he leaves home; what is he seeking; the challenges that he faces; how does he respond to them? As we read the mythical accounts, we begin to learn something about ourself. Myths, then, can inspire in us some level of self-knowledge and understanding. The myths are actually about *us*—we have to find out how.

1.3.2 Reading myths

1.3.2.1 In a sense, a myth is a layered story or episode coded with a message or moral. Its message or moral is all the more significant because it is about the Buddha, the ideal of our spiritual faith and life. Those unwilling or unable to read such messages may dismiss the key events in the Bodhisattva myths, that is, the stories of the Buddha between his conception and awakening. We should not shirk our task, our responsibility, but to carefully reflect on them for ourself.

At least, we should not project our biases and hang-ups onto the Buddha. "Isn't he irresponsible for leaving his wife and children?" "Why does he run away from the world instead of engaging it?" "Why does he deny himself the world's pleasure when our body is made for pleasure?" Such questions actually betray our own hang-ups. Instead, we should ask ourself: "Why do I ask such a question?" The life of the Buddha is really about us. This is the essence of a myth: it is a colourful dramatization of certain aspects of our own personalities and experiences on the stage of our collective lives.

1.3.2.2 In this study, we will especially discuss, amongst other things, the Bodhisattva's miraculous birth; his childhood meditation; his life of pleasure in the 3 mansions; his encounters with the 4 sights; his renunciation; and his self-mortification. These are integral and vital episodes that define the Bodhisattva and prepare him to evolve into **the Buddha**, the most evolved being by spiritual natural selection.

To really understand these myths—indeed, to appreciate the life of the Buddha in our understanding of the Dharma—it helps to start by reading these myths literally, just as they are. To edit and bowdlerize these stories is to safely remove whatever we deem as fantastic or fabulous in our childhood fairy tales of Jack and the beanstalk, Beauty and the beast, Rapunzel, the emperor's new clothes, and of course, Aesop's fables and the Jātaka stories. These are the tales that have enriched us in our earliest learning and happy memories.

Buddhist myths give us a healthy and imaginative childhood so that we grow up as ever wiser and more creative adults. They enrich us with a language that reads the riddles of life and overcome its challenges, reminding us how others before us have been nurtured and have matured in wisdom, goodness and freedom.

1.3.2.3 Once we have learned to read the Buddha myths, then, we are in a good position to understand them—to see how they actually relate to the riddles and struggles in our own life. To be able to read the myths means that we are ready to read our own life—to see the *meaning* of life itself; to understand the myths, then, is to see the *purpose* of our life—a journey of self-questioning, self-knowing and self-liberation.

1.3.3 The miracle of myths

1.3.3.1 A myth is, in an important way, a dramatization or replay of universal themes and challenges in our lives. These themes and challenges are replayed on a social or cosmic stage. We begin to see ourselves as part of a bigger frame of reality. These Buddhist myths remind us that we can take charge of our lives—but only after we have understood what these myths really mean and the purpose we must have in our life.

1.3.3.2 On the cosmic stage, anything is possible. It is an inner journey into our mind and heart, where we directly encounter the realities of our emotions, of good and bad—of greed, hate and delusion, and of charity, love and wisdom. We see great challenges, even life-threatening situations—but things always work out in wondrous ways. We call them “miracles,” when good triumphs in surprising and unexpected ways.

1.4 MIRACLES

1.4.1 The significance of miracles in the Buddha’s life

1.4.1.1 Miracles or miraculous events—especially in the Buddha’s life—have not been much studied as a category by scholars. Scholars of Buddhism and Buddhist writers have, in various ways, expounded at length on the traditional set of miraculous events and superhuman powers related to the Buddha and his disciples.³⁰ They have, however, shown little interest in proposing any kind of theory of miracles, even in terms of the Buddha.

Such miracles and powers, related in the suttas, commentaries and later works, are simply recounted or dismissed without any sustained or helpful effort to explain them. In fact, many Buddhist writers and teachers make a point of downplaying the significance of any supernatural or superhuman events. They insist that such events and powers are simply “stories or blessings,” or “Indian rhetoric or hyperbole,” or by-products of spiritual cultivation and attainment, not their goal.

1.4.1.2 This dismissive approach is not wrong—it may even be helpful—if we intend to practise meditation and do so with a view-free mind to gain full mental concentration.³¹ The Buddha himself disallows his disciples from making public displays of their powers,³² and he gives the highest priority to the “miracle of instruction” (*anusāsani, pāṭihāriya*).³³

The reason for such a dismissive attitude towards the miraculous element in the life and teachings of the Buddha is probably because they are seen as something that “needs to be explained” as part of that teaching. This may well be so. Moreover, it is actually unnecessary to prove them to a believing audience, especially an ethnic audience that has been raised on such traditions, most of whom actually accept these accounts to be literally true.

1.4.1.3 Most modern Buddhists—including western Buddhists—are generally open-minded enough to accept the miraculous in the stories and actions of the Buddha and his disciples, without really taking them seriously. In fact, up to modern times, Buddhist miraculous stories are not only accepted, but even popular at all social levels.

³⁰ For accounts of miracles by the Buddha’s disciples, see SD 27.5a.

³¹ See SD 40a.1 (4.4.3) on a “detached” mind. On overcoming doubt, see SD 40a.8.

³² See **Pinḍola Bhāra, dvāja S** (DhA 14.2.2a), SD 27.6a(2.5); Vinaya rule, SD 1.7 (3.3).

³³ See **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11,8/1:214), SD 1.7.

It is only after the colonial period up to our times, we sometimes have secular-minded monastics and teachers who tend to dismiss such stories. The sad reality is that they also tend to dismiss whatever they see as inconvenient in the Vinaya rules. Scholars have introduced the term, **Protestant Buddhism**, to describe such an attitude that arose as a reaction against the Protestant missions amongst Sinhalese Buddhists and their close contact with the knowledge and technologies of the West.

The term also suggests that while reacting against Protestant religion, these Buddhists are at least subtly, if not profoundly, influenced by these Christians in their attitudes towards Buddhism.³⁴ While the Protestants tend to reject the Catholic idea of the miraculous, these “Protestant” Buddhists, too, tend to reject the miraculous in Buddhism. Fortunately, a number of teachers and scholars have given us some helpful and sensitive analyses of the Buddha stories—in all their wonders.³⁵

1.4.1.4 A rejection of the miraculous in Buddhism due to an ideology or dogmatic stand means that we are depriving ourselves of a very vital aspect of the Buddhist tradition that is a salient feature of all successful religions. More seriously, we deprive ourselves of a dynamic psychological and spiritual language for our deeper understanding of the Buddha Dharma for self-knowing and as a counselling tool to help and heal others.

The problem lies not in the miraculous stories, events or powers themselves, but what they represent and how we understand, explain and use such accounts in our practice and preaching of Buddhism. If we are still uncertain of the significance of any miraculous aspect of a Buddhist story or sutta, we should set it aside for the moment and proceed with our study for the sake of Dharma practice. But when we understand the truth and beauty of these mythical accounts and states, they become like the poetry and colours of an artistic poet relating to us the greatest story of cosmic liberation.

1.4.2 Life of the Buddha as literature and as symbols

1.4.2.1 The stories of the Buddha’s life—our focus here is the Bodhisattva from his departure from Tusita (his earthly conception) to his awakening as the Buddha—were told over 2500 years ago. For centuries, they were handed down orally, as was the common practice for religious teachings and traditions. The idea here clearly was that, firstly, the Dharma is to be directly heard from a teacher in the proper environment, usually as a daily teaching session in the monasteries, highlighted by the full-moon and new-moon days and nights.

1.4.2.2 The second reason for the oral tradition is for the purpose of handing the Dharma intact from teacher to pupil over time. It is likely that by the time of Asoka (reigned c268-c232 BCE), at least some parts of the Pali canon (mainly the 5 Nikāyas) were written down. Some of the suttas are mentioned by name, such as in the Minor Rock Edict 3.³⁶ However, the word *dhamma* in Asoka’s inscriptions should be properly understood from its context, since it may have the sense of “social duties” or of “the Buddha’s teaching.”³⁷ It is traditionally said that the Pali canon³⁸ was written down during the 4th council in the Alu

³⁴ The term, “Protestant Buddhism,” was coined by R Gombrich & G Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed*, Delhi, 1988:7. See Oxford Dict of Buddhism, 2003: Protestant Buddhism.

³⁵ Amongst such works are: Chalmers 1894, 1895; Printz 1925; Windisch 1908; Foucher 1934, 1949; Thomas 1949; Strong 2001.

³⁶ For translation, see <https://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/dhammika/wheel386.html>.

³⁷ For Buddhism-related inscriptions of Asoka’s, see <https://www.cs.colostate.edu/~malaiya/ashoka.html>. See Gombrich 1988:129-136, 2006:129-136.

³⁸ For an overview and refs, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pāli_Canon; also K R Norman, *Pali Literature*, 1983.

Vihāra³⁹ in Sri Lanka, under the patronage of king Vattagamini (no earlier than 29-17 BCE), that is, some 450 years after the Buddha's passing.⁴⁰

1.4.2.3 Another reality we must accept is that even scripture is **literature**. As literature, scripture uses language to express itself. It uses a wide range of linguistic tools and literary conventions—stories,⁴¹ poems,⁴² tropes,⁴³ parables,⁴⁴ humour,⁴⁵ imagery,⁴⁶ metaphor,⁴⁷ hyperbole,⁴⁸ symbolism,⁴⁹ apophasis;⁵⁰ above all, it uses words.⁵¹ They are *texts* and we need to understand not only the words, but how and why they are spoken or presented—their import and intent:⁵² we need to understand their *context*, that is, to tease out their intended sense or meanings.

The 2 levels of teachings addressed by **the Neyy'attha Nī'tattha Sutta** (A 2.3.5+6) is vital here and we should carefully study this Sutta for a greater appreciation of Buddhist mythology.⁵³ While such texts tend to be *instructive*, they are also *inspirational*—we simply need to learn to enjoy them and bring that joy to others, too.

1.4.2.4 Unless we are working on something like a history of early Buddhism, there is no good reason for us not to enjoy reading or listening to the Buddha's story just as we enjoy watching a movie or a space fiction series. Indeed, if we are willing to bow before Buddha images, or recite Pali verses extolling the Buddha, or worship relics, or dedicate merits, or celebrate Vesak—all of which involve some faith and symbolism, why can't we take the miraculous stories in the same spirit? In a sense, these myths are literary and artistic representations⁵⁴ of the one we honour as the highest.

[1.5 THE BUDDHA AND THE DHARMA](#)

[1.5.1 The Dharma is above even the Buddha](#)

1.5.1.1 Unlike religions that totally depend on a saviour, a prophet or some holy figure for its existence—that the whole religion is centred on believing or surrendering to that figure—early Buddhism stands unique in rejecting such a person-centred notion. The reason is simple enough: in the final analysis, *no* “person” exists, but only impermanence, change and passing phenomena.⁵⁵ In a sense, we even can say that early Buddhism is a **teaching** that is *not* “teacher-centred,” but is an experiential process.

³⁹ P *āloka, vihara* or *āloka, leṇa* (“the cave of light”), situated 6.4 km (4 mi) north of Mātale on the Dambulla road. Central Province, 30 km north of Kandy.

⁴⁰ Mahv 23.100 f.

⁴¹ On stories, see SD 27.5b (1.2); SD 27.6a (2.1.1).

⁴² On poems, see **Subhā Thī** (SD 20.7).

⁴³ On tropes, see **Dh 97**, SD 10.6.

⁴⁴ For 2 excellent parables—of the water-snake and of the raft— see **Alagaddūpama S** (M 22,11-14), SD 3.13.

⁴⁵ On humour, see **Aggañña S** (D 27) + SD 2.19 (5).

⁴⁶ On imagery, see SD 49.8b (7.1.5.5).

⁴⁷ On metaphor, see SD 36.9 (4.5.1, 4.6.1); SD 40a.14 (3.1.5).

⁴⁸ On hyperbole, see SD 36.9 (4.6.1).

⁴⁹ On symbolism, see SD 36.9 (6.1.5).

⁵⁰ Apophasis is the literary and philosophical use of negative language: see SD 40a.1 (6.3).

⁵¹ On Buddhism as literature, see SD 40a.14 (4.1); SD 10.9 (8.2.3). See **Language and discourse**, SD 26.11.

⁵² On intentional language, see **Dh 97**@ SD 10.6 esp (5); SD 26.11 (6.5).

⁵³ A 2.3.5+6 (SD 1.6b). See also SD 26.11 (1.2).

⁵⁴ For refs to artistic representations of the Buddha, see Nakamura 2000, *passim*.

⁵⁵ This idea is based on the teaching of non-self (*anattā*): **Anatta Lakkhaṇa S** (S 22.59), SD 1.2 (2); SD 2.16 (1.1).

1.5.1.2 It's like schooling and education. The most vital aspect of schooling is not the teacher, but the teaching, the lessons that we imbibe, and the change and growth we experience as we are *educated*—when we learn to express or bring out the best in our mind and heart. Our education need not depend on any one teacher, but the proper teaching of lessons based on wisdom and ideas of great philosophers, scientists, writers, poets and teachers of the past. Education, then, is the process of change and growth we experience when we are schooled.

1.5.1.3 Our “school,” as practising Buddhists, is **the noble path** which we must ourselves take. Even then, it is not the path's goal that transforms us—it is the path itself, or rather our journeying on it, that transforms us. In this sense, *the path is the teaching and the goal*. Our teacher—the Buddha—teaches us personally while he lives, but he places the Dharma above even himself—as stated in **the Gāraṇa Sutta** (S 6.2).⁵⁶

Hence, the Dharma lives on even after the Buddha. It is this Dharma that continues to guide us as the path. In this sense, the Buddha is no different from the Dharma; we, too, are no different from the Dharma—when we walk the path. It is our practice and experience of the Dharma that authenticates the path. The Dharma, then, is *neither* a belief *nor* an object (person, being or thing) which we must have faith in or worship. It is the noble path on which we advance to awakening.

1.5.1.4 The Dhamma,niyāma Sutta (A 3.134) records a remarkable statement by the Buddha,

Whether there is the arising of tathagatas [buddhas thus come] or not, this element remains, this fixedness of things, the order of things, that

All formations⁵⁷ are impermanent.

sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā ...

All formations are unsatisfactory.

sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā ...

All dharmas [principles behind all things] are non-self.

sabbe dhammā anattā.

A tathagata fully awakens to this truth, realizes it. Having fully awakened to it and realized it, he tells, teaches, proclaims, establishes, reveals, analyses and clarifies that

“All formations are impermanent,”

“All formations are unsatisfactory,”

“All dharmas are non-self.”

(A 3.134/1:286), SD 26.8, abridged

This statement reinforces the primacy of the teaching above the teacher, the truth that exists whether the teacher proclaims it or not. Again, we see the uniqueness of early Buddhism in the history of religions. In discovering these truths, fully understanding them, he becomes **buddha**, “the one who has understood,” and awakened to true reality, liberated by that truth, who teaches us this liberating truth—he is a unique being, too.⁵⁸

1.5.2 The historical Buddha

1.5.2.1 Once we understand the teaching of **the Dhamma,niyāma Sutta** (A 3.134) [1.5.1.4], we have a better understanding in our quest for the historical Buddha. In a significant sense, we do not need to prove there is *a historical buddha* or *the historical Buddha* for the Dharma to be true. Furthermore, we do not even need to prove that “early Buddhism” *has been* or *is* the teaching of that historical Buddha, or

⁵⁶ S 6.2 (SD 12.3).

⁵⁷ Whatever that exists in this universe or outside of it, whether physical or mental, at any time.

⁵⁸ On the uniqueness of the Buddha, see **(Pāda) Doṇa S** (A 4.36), SD 36.13; SD 49.10 (1.3).

even which parts of the Buddhist scriptures are the oldest core, the most authentic collection of earliest teachings. If we must do this, then we are a “book” faith, like the theistic religions. Since we uphold the Dharma above all else, as we have seen, it is an experience-based system, a path of self-awakening.

Hence, the “founder of Buddhism,” the discoverer of the path, is called the fully self-awakened one (*sammā,sambuddha*). And those who follow him, practising the Dharma and attaining this same awakening and liberation—the **arhats** (*arahata*)—realize the very same awakening and attain nirvana in the same way, so to speak. The Buddha is simply “the first amongst equals” (*primus inter pares*), as stated in **the Sambuddha Sutta** (S 22.58).⁵⁹

1.5.2.2 What we have said so far [1.5.1-1.5.2.1] should be clearly understood before we go on to the next section and beyond. [If not, we should re-study these sections before proceeding.]

If we have understood that our Dharma practice is the “quest for the true Dharma,” that is, the quest for *self-awakening*, then we now have a better understanding of what is meant by **the quest for the historical Buddha**, a vision of one self-awakened.

Let’s use the education metaphor again [§§1.5.1.2-1.5.1.3]. Having completed their education, some graduates may gather together and say, “Let’s look for our Professor and thank him!” And so they do. Then, this old Professor retires, and one amongst these graduates becomes the new Professor. Then, he teaches a new batch of undergraduates, and they, in turn, graduate. After that, they, too, gather in celebration and say, “Let’s look for our Professor and thank him!”

In this sense, the Professor is not merely a *person*, but the best that the whole path of education has to give us. In essence, this is “the miracle of education” (*anusāsani,pāṭihāriya*), as taught in **the Kevaddha Sutta** (D 11,8). [1.4.1.2]

1.5.2.3 A modern pioneer in the study of the Buddha’s life as legend and history is **Edward Joseph (E J) Thomas** (1869-1958), “one of England’s most brilliant Buddhist scholars.”⁶⁰ Born in Thornhill, West Yorkshire, he was the son of a gardener at Thornhill Rectory.⁶¹ He left school and was a gardener for 12 years. In 1896, at 27, he joined the University of St Andrews, where under the supervision of John Burnet, he obtained a master’s degree in classics (1900-1901).⁶² He studied linguistics at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and graduated in 1905. He was the curator of the University of Cambridge library for many years and was appointed Dean of the Oriental Languages Department. His specialty was Theravāda, of which his works, such as *The Life of the Buddha as Legend and History* (1927; 3rd ed 1949), remain widely cited for their clarity and accuracy. He was also a noted Pali scholar and translator.⁶³

1.5.2.4 E J Thomas, in his *Life of the Buddha as Legend and History*, writes: “Whatever additions to the legend there may be, the further we go back the less do we find those features that give colour to the theory of a sun myth,⁶⁴ or to anything but the view that he was a historical personage, a great religious reformer and moral teacher, and the proclaimer of the Noble Eightfold Path” (1927:226)

Thomas bases his argument on two distinct questions. The first is about the Buddha himself: Did he or did he not exist? The second, on the Dharma, is: Are the stories told about him credible as historical

⁵⁹ S 22.58 (SD 49.10).

⁶⁰ William Peiris, *The Western Contribution to Buddhism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973:49-51.

⁶¹ Peiris 1973:49-51.

⁶² [http://www.tuvienquangduc.com.au/English/figure/18westerncontribution-2.html#E. J. THOMAS](http://www.tuvienquangduc.com.au/English/figure/18westerncontribution-2.html#E._J._THOMAS).

⁶³ W Stede. Review of *Early Buddhist Scriptures*, in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 9,2 1938:439.

⁶⁴ This is Thomas’ rejection of the notion that the Buddha was merely a solar myth, a speculation by Émile Senart, *Essai sur la légende du Bouddha*, 1875 (Wynne, 2005:35), and also Heinrich Kern, A Barth, R Otto and Ananda K Coomaraswamy (de Jong, 1974:79-81). On the idea of the Buddha as a solar myth, see (1.0.1.2).

evidence? This inquiry clearly depends on the natural principle that the earliest texts are the original teachings. Hence, the quest for the historical Buddha is, in reality, also *a quest for his authentic teachings*.

1.5.2.5 However, this theory is not without its challenges. What we take to be the earliest or original texts can only be the result of our surmises and conjectures based on the language and teachings of those texts. Or perhaps, some comparative study of contemporaneous teachings, systems and events may help us further plot the contents and contexts of these early teachings.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, the stories and miracles we encounter in the suttas are likely to give us an idea of minds and hearts of the people living within the first 5 after-century India, while the narratives from the commentaries may give us an idea of the psychology and sociology of the Buddhists and their society during the 2nd 500 years or more after the Buddha,⁶⁶ and probably also their traditions and memories of the Buddha, his disciples and their teachings.

1.5.2.6 Once again, we must remind ourself—we are not a “book” religion [1.5.2.1]—hence, we do not really need to be certain of **an urtext**, a core of original teachings to authenticate what we see as being “early Buddhism.” The texts, most of what we have today, especially the teachings of 4 Nikāyas and the older books of the 5th Nikāya, collectively give us a great deal of information, instruction and intuition into what the Buddha has taught. They give us valuable instructions in the theory and practice of moral virtue and of mental cultivation, and teachings that are the bases for insight wisdom—these are **the 3 trainings**, when properly practised bring us to the path of awakening in this life itself.

The early suttas, then, are like computer programmes that we must run and work with the lessons that the early arhats and reciters have encoded of the teachings as they have received from the Buddha and form their own insights. The authentication comes not from the possession or recitation, or even mastering of these texts—but from internalizing their essence in our spiritual cultivation. Only with a calm and clear mind of growing wisdom will we be able to continue to deepen our understanding of the early texts, to read between the lines, and to see for ourselves the same final vision of the Buddha and the arhats.

1.6 TRUTH AND TRADITION

1.6.1 Truth

1.6.1.1 Alfred Foucher (1865-1952), a renowned French scholar of Graeco-Buddhist art and the father of Gandhara studies, in his *The Life of the Buddha according to the ancient texts and monuments of India* (1963),⁶⁷ writes in connection with the study of the miraculous life of the Buddha:

“Possibly at no other point of Śākyamuni’s biography can we grasp more easily the play of the two opposing forces that fashioned it. The first, which grew with the fervor of each generation, tended to free the Bodhisattva from any limitations or impurity. The second, in contrast, compelled even the most exalted believers to admit certain facts concerning the Master, his family, his country, which were well authenticated by tradition that it would have been sacrilegious, and

⁶⁵ See Penner 2009:123-142 (ch 17).

⁶⁶ The Pali Commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*) were prob compiled in India from the 4th cent CE right until the time of the Turkish invasions and extermination of Buddhism in India (11th cent). However, the texts we have today seem are mostly to be back-translations from the Sinhalese translations of older Pali versions which are now lost. See L R Goonesekere, “Aṭṭhakathā,” in *Ency Bsm* (Sri anka) 2:335-352.

⁶⁷ Tr of orig French, *La vie du Bouddha, d’après les textes et les monuments de l’Inde*, 1939.

consequently impossible to deny them. ... even the most extravagant accounts always contain a trace of the reality and of the humanity so characteristic of Śākyamuni.

(1963:20; highlights added)

1.6.1.2 The compilers of the Buddha-story were not writing a history book or some newspaper report. Their intended audience—the ancient Indians—were not really interested in a historical view of the Buddha, neither were they aware of such a notion as we tend to have today. But even today, we can at best only believe the books and information we are exposed to. We do not really have any way of authenticating the history books or newspaper articles that we read, unless we have been there or it is specially about us.

1.6.1.3 The Buddha-narrative compilers were what we today would call “public relations officers.” Their task was to present to the masses—to us—the presence of the most evolved and most remarkable of humans in our midst. We are to be impressed and inspired by this news so that we are moved to meet this special individual, the Buddha. And when we do meet him, his person, purity and wisdom—his full awakening—will light up our heart and change our life. Even after his death, when we properly practise his teachings, the effect we experience is that of “seeing the Buddha.” [10.2.3]

These miraculous stories are not merely unbridled fantasies and hyperboles but a convention of the day—that a great teacher, the Buddha—is a unique being, and his uniqueness has to be highlighted, even made a “selling-point” for attracting and keeping the fickle and frivolous masses to the Buddha’s teaching and life-style to bring quality, authenticity and awakening to their own lives.

Hence, the Buddha story-tellers painted him on a narrative canvas in a totally free style and in the purest of colours. These are the mass media and digital network of the day. The Buddha is presented as a unique being who is now accessible to the world. When our attention is directed to such a being, we are more likely to be able to emulate him, to be wise and compassionate like him, and, above all, to be liberated from suffering like him.

1.6.2 Tradition

1.6.2.1 “Even the most extravagant accounts [of the Bpdhosattva’s miraculous life] always contain a trace of the reality and of the humanity so characteristic of Śākyamuni,” proclaims **Foucher** [1.6.1.1]. Despite all the marking-up of the stories of the Buddha, they are all rooted in truth and reality. The miraculous language is that of the masses—the ancient sculptors would present the Buddha in the most beautiful manner they are familiar with, and they would enlist, besides the local deities and demons, even the Greek gods and heroes, into the service of the Buddha (as evident in the Buddhist sculptures of Gandhāra).

1.6.2.2 The timeless Dharma has become human in the Buddha. The later Hindus would in fact incorporate the Buddha as an embodiment (*avatāra*) of their own Dharma in their own pantheon. For the Buddhists, however, the Buddha was, is and always will be simply, yet nobly, the embodiment of the Dharma in the sense that both the person and teaching point to **non-self** (*anattā*).

It’s just like when we admire a great painting or hear a beautiful piece of music, and spontaneously utter: “The artist is *in* his work!” Or, when we are privileged to see a great artist painting or playing, and we cry out: “The art is *with* the artist!”

The real moving is within us: the artist—the Buddha—is merely the occasion that musters all that is good into the moment that fills us to the brim to run over with joy. This is what the meditators call “joy”—the present moment of the beauty and truth that is the Buddha Dharma. The presence of the

Buddha in the world—our life—is to calm and clear our heart to ready ourself for the path of awakening, so that we taste what the Buddha himself has—the taste of freedom.

II

SEEING THE BUDDHA

Yo maṃ passati, so dhammaṃ passati
Who sees me sees Dharma⁶⁸

2 Conception

2.1 THE BODHISATTVA IN TUSITA⁶⁹

2.1.1 Seta, ketu

2.1.1.1 As a rule, the Bodhisattva spends his penultimate birth, that is, before his last conception, in Tusita, the heaven of the contented devas, waiting for the due time for his last birth. This is the 4th highest of the 6 sense-world heavens (A 1:210).⁷⁰ 400 human years equal to a day of Tusita time. The life-span of the devas there is 4,000 years.⁷¹ According to the Vibhaṅga (§1023), 1 celestial day (cd) is 400 human years (hy). 30 such days (hd) make one of their celestial month (cm). Their lifespan is 4000 celestial years (cy), which, in human terms, would then be 576 million years!⁷²

The significance of these time-measurements and huge numbers are significant. It means that the ancient Buddhist teachers and reciters were aware of large numbers.⁷³ Furthermore, the Buddhist idea of “emptiness” (*suñña*; Skt *sūnyā*) is directly related to the mathematical zero.⁷⁴ During the commentarial times, there was also an awareness of the decimal system, as reflected in the conception of the 10 perfections (*dasa pāramī*).⁷⁵ [2.4.1.9 n]

2.1.1.2 While living in Tusita, the Bodhisattva’s name is **Seta, ketu** (Skt *śveta, ketu*, “white comet”),⁷⁶ but we are not told whether he is the king of the Tusita gods, usually known as Santusita.⁷⁷ The Bodhi-

⁶⁸ **Vakkali S** (S 22.87,13), SD 8.8; SD 51.24 (2.5.2.1); SD 51.25 (2.2.2.6). Cf “who sees dependent arising,” see SD 6.16 (5).

⁶⁹ For refs to the Bodhisattva’s sojourn in Tusita, see J 1:48; BA 272. For other refs and for artistic representations, see Nakamura 2000:400 n102.

⁷⁰ For a cosmological table, see SD 1.7 (App).

⁷¹ (**Tad-ah’**) **Uposatha S** (A 3.70,21/1:214), SD 4.18; A 8.42/4:253 = A 8.45/4:261; Vbh 1023/423. Comys, however, traditionally gives their life-span as being up to 16,000 celestial years (*dibba ... vassa*).

⁷² That is: 400 hy x 12 hm x 30 hd x 4000 cy = 576,000,000 celestial years. See Abhs:BRS 196 f.

⁷³ On Indian Buddhist awareness of infinitesimals, see SD 36.2 (7.1.1).

⁷⁴ See SD 40a.10 (9.2.4 + 9.3).

⁷⁵ See A K Dutt, “[Decimal system in India](#)” in *Ency of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine in Non-Western Cultures*, Dordrecht, 2013.

⁷⁶ VA 1:161; MA 1:125; J 1:401. Seta, ketu is the protagonist in **Seta, ketu J** (J 377/3:232-237), but the two seem unrelated.

⁷⁷ **Puñña, kiriya, vatthu S** (A 8.36) which says that Santusita excels the other gods in 10 ways, ie, in: celestial life-span, beauty, happiness, glory, authority, form, sound, fragrance, taste and touch (A 8.36/4:243), SD 22.17.

sattva is unlikely to be the lord of the Tusita devas since he is only sojourning there before coming down into our world.⁷⁸

When it is time for the Buddha to appear in the world, the devas of the 10,000 world-systems—our whole physical universe—will assemble in a cosmic array before him to invite him to be born among humans. There is a great ecstatic uproar—called **the “buddha-uproar”** (*buddha-kolāhala*)—when the Bodhisattva accepts this request.⁷⁹ But before declaring his readiness, the Bodhisattva will make the 5 great investigations. [2.2]

2.1.1.3 Seta, ketu is not the only Bodhisattva living in Tusita; there is one other. The Bodhisattva **Metteyya** (Skt *maitreya*), the future and last buddha of this world-period,⁸⁰ is now living there under the name of Nātha, deva. This is also a name given to the god Veṅhu (Skt *viṣṇu*), who is regarded as the protector (*nātha*) of Sri Lanka.⁸¹ It is not clear if Metteyya and Veṅhu are the same person. This religious development must have occurred late, when Hindu influences had gained strength in the country.

2.1.2 Why Tusita?

2.1.2.1 Nowhere are we told why the Bodhisattva, as a rule, chooses to live in Tusita during his penultimate life. Let us hazard an explanation. Strictly speaking, no one can choose where to be born. However, since the Bodhisattva is a being of great merits (*puñña*) and perfections (*pāramī*), let us assume that it is his good karma that brings him to Tusita.

Amongst the sense-worlds, the Bodhisattva is unlikely to be reborn in **Tāvatiṃsa** because after the 4 great kings (*cātum, mahārājika*) [2.2.1.7], who are merely guardians of heaven’s 4 quarters, Tāvatiṃsa is the most mundane of the sense heavens. In fact, Sakra, the lord of Tāvatiṃsa and his devas often spend their time either enjoying themselves in their divine pleasure-gardens or battling with the asuras.

2.1.2.2 Although the **Yāma** devas have longer lives than the Tāvatiṃsa devas, they are engrossed in their pleasures and blissfulness, and do little else. Above the Tusita devas are **the gods who delight in creation** (*nimmāṇa, ratī*) who are too happily busy, even for divine beings, for a Buddha-to-be. Similarly, the gods above them, the highest of the sense heavens, **the gods who lord over others’ creations** (*para, -nimmīta, vasa. vatti*) clearly exhibit some desire or attachment.

Having surveyed all these heavens, **Tusita** is the most suitable abode for the Bodhisattva, that is, to be amongst the devas who are full of joy (*tuṭṭha, haṭṭhāti tusitā*) (VbhA 519). They are neither too active like the 4 guardian kings or the Tāvatiṃsa devas, nor too engrossed in their divine pleasures in a mundane manner like the Yāma devas and the two higher heavens. In fact, Tusita, despite being sandwiched amongst the sense-heavens is said to be *the most beautiful of them*.⁸²

⁷⁸ **Cūḷa, vaṃsa**, the Sinhala chronicle, says that the Bodhisattva Metteyya is the lord of Tusita (Cuv 52.47).

⁷⁹ On the 3 kinds of uproars, marking the end of days (*kappa, kolāhala*), the advent of a world monarch (*cakka. vatti, kolahala*) and the advent of the Buddha (*buddha, kolāhala*): A 4.127/2:130 (radiance); A 8.70/4:312 (earthquakes); SA 1:130 f; J 1:47 f; ApA 42; BA 272. The 5 uproars, the 3 + the blessing uproar (*maṅgala*~; heralding the Maṅgala S, Khp 5) and the sagehood uproar (*moneyya*~; heralding the Nālaka Gātha, Sn 699-723), SD 49.18: KhpA 120 f; SnA 1:300. The Buddha uproar: UA 149; ItA 1:133; BA 141 (Maṅgala Buddha); CA 50. Cf DA 2:670; MA 5:91; SA 2:379.

⁸⁰ The 5 buddhas of our “fortunate aeon” (*bhadda, kappa*) are: Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana, Kassapa, our Buddha, Gotama, and the future Buddha, Metteyya: SD 36.2 (3.1.2), SD 49.8b (15.2.2).

⁸¹ Cuv 100.248; Cuv:G 2:243 n6. According to Lalita, Vistara, a Skt life of the Buddha, before descending from Tusita, he appoints Maitreya as king of Tusita in his place. This is, of course, a Mahāyāna tradition, not found in early Buddhism.

⁸² Mahv 32.72 f, 30.88 n.

2.1.2.3 At this point, let us examine the temporal perspective of the narrative. In terms of **narrative sequence**, the Bodhisattva as prince **Vessantara** (J 547)—who is the protagonist of the longest and most beautiful of the Jātaka, wherein he practises the perfection of giving⁸³ [3.5.2]. Upon dying, he is reborn as **Seta, ketu** in Tusita, just before his descent into our world as Siddhattha to become the Buddha of our time.⁸⁴ The term “narrative sequence” reminds us that we are not dealing with mundane history here, but a **hagiography** or sacred biography spanning over three lives.

The Bodhisattva’s sojourn in Tusita is alluded to in **the Acchariya-b, bhūta Sutta** (M 123).⁸⁵ Such a miraculous account is rarely (and only briefly) mentioned elsewhere, but more often found, often in some detail, in the Commentaries [2.2.1.1]. The point we should note here is that the story of the Bodhisattva spending his penultimate life in Tusita and similar miraculous stories were commonplace in ancient Indian religions.

The post-Buddha Buddhist teachers had woven this tapestry of miraculous narratives to legitimize and reinforce the Buddha’s position as a holy figure—indeed, the holiest of the holy—in the minds and hearts of the masses. The Bodhisattva’s sojourn in Tusita represents one of the first steps towards an apotheosis or deification of the Buddha, a process that fully flowered later in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

2.2 THE 5 INVESTIGATIONS

2.2.1 The ideal conditions

2.2.1.1 We have noted that even before proclaiming his readiness to descend into our world, the Bodhisattva Seta, ketu makes **the “5 great investigations”** (*pañca, mahā, vilokana*) to find the ideal conditions for his earthly abode—the human lifespan, the continent, the country, the family and the mother—which are reported only in the Commentaries.⁸⁶ According to **the Jātaka Nidāna** (J 1:48 f), the Bodhisattva makes the following investigations [with explanatory comments following within square brackets]:

(1) THE HUMAN LIFESPAN

2.2.1.2 The Bodhisattva’s 1st investigation is that of the suitable lifespan of the people amongst whom he would be born. It is said that early in the human evolution, their normal lifespan is more than 100,000 years. They do not notice decay and death; hence, it is not the right time to teach Dharma to them. The Buddha’s teaching is never devoid of the 3 characteristics of impermanence, suffering and non-self. Even when these humans ask about them, and the characteristic are explained to them, they would not understand. Without understanding the teaching, there is no breakthrough into awakening.

When the human life-span is too short, that is, less than 100 years, it is also not the right time. They have excessive defilements and will be difficult to teach. Teaching the Dharma to them is like drawing a line on the water (*udake danḍa, rājī*): it at once disappears. The right time is when their lifespan is between 100,000 and 100 years. At that time, the normal human lifespan is 100 years, which is suitable as the right time for teaching the Dharma. This is the ideal temporal condition.

⁸³ J 547/6:479-593.

⁸⁴ The Northern traditions (Skt & Chin)—such as **MĀ 32** (T1.469c27); **Saṅghabhedavastu** (Gnoli 1977:21,1)—regard the Jotipāla birth—as recorded in **(Majjhima) Ghaṭikāra S** (M 81), SD 49.3—as the birth just before his birth in Tusita: see SD 52.2 (1.2.3 n).

⁸⁵ M 123,3/3:119 f (SD 52.2).

⁸⁶ J 2:48 f :: J:J 64-66; DA 2:428-430; MA 4:171-173; AA 1:114, 122; BA 273; ApA 53 f. **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14) not only mentions the 7 buddhas of recent times but also gives their details under 11 heads (*pariccheda*) (D 14/2:1-54), SD 49.8a; see also SD 36.2 (3.2.2).

(2) THE CONTINENT (*dīpa*)

2.2.1.3 The Bodhisattva's 2nd investigation is that of the ideal continent where he is to be born. Before we can have some idea of the significance of this 2nd condition, we need to know how the people (at least the composers of this Buddha myth) saw our world and universe. Once again, we should not be tempted to impose our current understanding of the structure of the cosmos. It would be interesting how future scientists (say, two millennia from now) would think of our current cosmic views!

The ancient Buddhist view of **the cosmos** is, in significant ways, less haphazard than the prevalent ideas of the time. Even then, we can today say that their ideas are at best imaginative. However, we must concede that the early Buddhists vaguely thought of the world as other ancient societies did: that it was *flat*. This notion is not distinctly clear from the suttas, nor do we see any geocentric Ptolemaic planetary system.

However, we often get hints of some kind of *heliocentric universe*. **The Kosala Sutta 1** (A 10.29), for example, describes our world-system, thus: "as far as the sun and the moon revolve, illuminating the quarters with their light,⁸⁷ there extends the thousandfold world-systems."⁸⁸

2.2.1.4 (1) The continent in which the Buddha is born is traditionally known as **Jambu,dīpa** (Skt *Jambu,dvipa*), the Jambul Continent, or Jambu,saṅḍa, the Jambul Grove.⁸⁹ It is not certain whether this name was actually used at that time, or a name introduced later on. Ancient Buddhist cosmography describes the world as comprising 4 continents (*mahā,dīpa*) around Mt Neru, Sineru, Meru or Sumeru, the cosmic mountain (sometimes identified with one of the Himalayan mountains). On the south is Jambu,dīpa (where buddhas arise); on the west, Aparā,go.yāna; on the north, Uttara,kuru; and on the east, Pubba,-videha.⁹⁰

(2) The continent of **Aparā,goyāna**, to the west of Sineru, is 7,000 leagues (*yojana*) wide, surrounded by 500 islands (SnA 2:443). According to the suttas, each world-system (*cakka,vāḷa*) has an Aparā,goyāna—and all the other continents, too (like a multiverse).⁹¹ It is inhabited by men (KhpA 123), but they have no houses and sleep on the ground (ThaA 3:177). In the centre of the continent is a **Kadamba** tree, whose trunk is 15 yojanas⁹² in girth and whose trunk and arms are 50 yojanas in length.⁹³

(3) **Uttara,kuru**, located north of the world, is described in detail in **the Āṭānāṭiya Sutta** (D 32), where Uttara,kuru is spoken of as a city (*pura*).⁹⁴ The men there neither own property nor have wives. They do not have to work for their living. The corn ripens by itself and sweet-scented rice is found boiling on hot

⁸⁷ With reasonable imagination, we should understand this as covering astronomically vast distances, as far as their light can be seen (as we today are able to see the astronomically distant heavenly bodies and remote space phenomena).

⁸⁸ *Yāvata bhikkhave candima,sūriyā pariharanti disā bhanti virocāmānā, tāva sahasadhā loko* (A 10.29/5:59-65), SD 16.15. In the term "thousandfold world-system," *sahasadhā loka* (late & Comy: *sahassa loka,dhātu* (Ap 2:576*)), "thousand" (*sahassa*) is not an exact number but alludes to astronomical "large numbers" and size of such a universe. See Reflection, "Parallel universes?" R450, 2016. A good intro to ancient Buddhist cosmology is Gethin 1998: 112-132 (ch 5).

⁸⁹ On Jambu,dīpa & tr of *jambu*, see SD 16.15 (3).

⁹⁰ For a recent study of ancient Buddhist cosmology, see Randy *Kloetzli* 1983:23-72 & Akira Sadakata 1997:25-40, esp 30-38.

⁹¹ **(Tika) Abhibhū S** (A 3.80/1:227), SD 54.1; **Kosala S 1** (A 10.29/5:59), SD 16.15.

⁹² This is the "lesser *yojana*," which refers to length and width: 1.8 m = 6 ft. See SD 47.8 (2.4.4.2).

⁹³ DA 2:623, 678, 3:868; MA 4:223; SA 1:74; AA 2:34; KhpA 176 f; SnA 1:278; ApA 222; BA 139; NcA 42 f; DhsA 298; VA 1:119. For further details on geography as envisioned in the Buddha's time, see SD (2.2.1.9-2.2.1.11).

⁹⁴ D 32/3:199-202 (SD 101.1). On Uttarakuru, see E W Hopkins, Epic Mythology, esp 1915:186.

oven-stoves.⁹⁵ The inhabitants go about riding on cows, on other humans, young and old. Their king rides on an elephant, on a horse, on state palanquins, and celestial chariots. Their cities are built in the air, and among those mentioned are Āṭānāṭā, Kusināṭā, Nāta, puriyā, Para, kusināṭā, Kapīvanta, Janogha, Nava, -navatiya, Ambara-Ambara, vatiya and Ālakamandā,⁹⁶ the last being the royal capital.

(4) **Pubba, videha** is the eastern of the 4 continents (*mahā, dīpā*) comprising the ancient world of the Indians.⁹⁷ It is 7,000 (SnA 443) or 8,000 (BA 112) yojanas in extent, and its chief tree is the acacia (*sirīsa*).⁹⁸ The humans there are twice as tall as us and have semi-circular faces. They are peaceful and vegetarian, living long and pleasurable lives (250 years) but are devoid of any true Dharma. The principal attributes of this continent are its mountains of diamonds, lapis lazuli, sapphires, emeralds, pearls, gold, silver and crystal.⁹⁹

(5) **Jambu, dīpa**, on the other hand, has humans living just the right life-span, the social conditions are favourable (peace and prosperity) and the people able to understand and learn when they are taught. Its population is neither too crowded nor too sparse. Of the 4 inhabited continents, Jambu, dīpa has the ideal spatial condition.

2.2.1.5 Does the Buddha know about **the nature of his world and universe**? Since the Buddha is capable of knowing whatever he wants to know, he would surely know the structure of the cosmos. The question now is whether his knowledge is that of our own time, or something more advanced in a futuristic or ultimate sense? We can never know this and don't really need to.

The point is that, assuming he has knowledge of the cosmos far advanced of his age, it would still have been difficult even for him to explain it to a people who have neither the language nor science to be able to understand such concepts. More importantly, as he stresses in **the Simsapā Sutta** (S 56.31), he only teaches what is relevant for our spiritual training and liberation.¹⁰⁰

2.2.1.6 We have no way of clearly knowing whether the ancient Indians viewed their world (the earth) as being flat or as being spherical. It is likely that the common belief that, like the rest of the ancient world, was that the earth was like a flat disc.¹⁰¹ The Buddhist texts, however, do not speak of any “world turtle”—a flat earth supported by 4 cosmic elephants, all standing on the back of a cosmic turtle, which, in turn, stands unsupported in space.¹⁰²

A careful study of the suttas and commentaries, however, will show **an evolution of the Buddhist cosmography**: from “world” (*loka*) to “world-system” (*loka, dhātu*) to “world-sphere” (*cakka, vāla*, literally, “ring of mountains”), with even some notion of “galaxy.” The world, to the early Buddhists, as we have noted, comprises the 4 continents located around a central or axial mountain, Mt Meru [2.2.1.4]. This arrangement serves as a template for thousands of such worlds [2.2.1.8]. However, we are not told whether this is in the same time-space continuum or in different ones. But this conception of a multiverse is already one ahead of its time, even almost modern.¹⁰³

⁹⁵ This is reminiscent of a futuristic “protein sequencer” (fictional 22nd century, *Star Trek Enterprise*), “food synthesizer” (23rd cent, *Star Trek: The original series*) or “food replicator” (24th cent, *Star Trek: The next generation*).

⁹⁶ Ālakamandā—often described as thronged with people like a city of the gods (D 16,5.18/2:147,1 ff = D 17,1.3/-2:170,7 ff), SD 9 + SD 36.12 respectively—echoes of Alexandria on the Indus, founded by Alexander the Great in 325, or any of 16 or more ancient cities named after Alexander. See **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16,5.18 n ad loc), SD 9.

⁹⁷ **(Tika) Abhibhū S** (A 3.80/1:227), SD 54.1; **Kosala S 1** (A A 10.29/5:59), SD 16.15.

⁹⁸ AA 2:35; NcA 42; DhS 299.

⁹⁹ <http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Purvavideha>.

¹⁰⁰ S 56.31/5:437 f (SD 21.7).

¹⁰¹ See SD 47.8 (2.4.4.4-2.4.4.5).

¹⁰² The earliest record we have of this myth is by Jñānarāja in c 1500: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Turtle.

¹⁰³ See Marasinghe 1974:44.

Each world-sphere (*cakkavāḷa*) comprises a *world* like ours, surrounded by a region of water, which rests on wind, which rests in space.¹⁰⁴ At the centre of the world-sphere is Mt Meru, the axis mundi, centre of the world-sphere. Around Meru are 7 metallic mountains (*giri*): Yugandhara, Īsadhara, Karavīka, Sudassana, Nemindhara, Vinataka and Assakaṇṇa.¹⁰⁵ Within such a world-system are the realms of the 33 gods (*tāvātimsa, bhavana*), of the asuras (titans) (*asura, bhavana*), the great hell (*avīci, mahā, niraya*)¹⁰⁶ and the 4 great continents (*mahā, dīpa*)—Jambu, dīpa, Aparā, goyāna, Pubba, videha and Uttara, kuru, each surrounded by 500 hundred smaller continents (*dīpa*). At the outermost perimeter of this world-system is an encircling range of “iron” mountains, that surrounds and contains the outermost “sea.” This is the traditional Buddhist conception of the physical universe, our so-called “sense-world” (*kāma, loka*).¹⁰⁷

Such world-systems are infinite in number. Between these such world-systems, there is a great inter-world hell (*lok’antarika mahā, niraya*).¹⁰⁸ **The Acchariya-b, bhūta Sutta** (M 123) commentary describes them, thus: “Amongst every 3 world-systems, there is a space measuring 8,000 yojanas (56,000 mi = 90,123 km). It is like the space amongst three cart-wheels or almsbowls touching one another.” (MA 4:177)¹⁰⁹

2.2.1.7 From the various accounts we have, both canonical and commentarial, of the ancient Indians’ **knowledge of the world**, they appear not to strictly separate their terrestrial geography with a wider cosmography. In other words, their “earth” and the universe are not strictly separate, especially in their conception of the 4-continent world centred around Mt Meru, which seems to be an axis mundi, the centre of the world, or of the galaxy.

Furthermore, the king of **Uttara, kuru** is Kuvera, also called Vessavana, because the name of his kingdom is called Visāna.¹¹⁰ Kuvera or Vessavaṇa, as we know, is one of the 4 great kings (*cātu, mahā, rāja*), protector of the northern quarter of the universe. Kuvera rules over the yakshas (*yakkha*), the inhabitants of Uttara, kuru. They hold their assemblies in a hall known as Bhagalavati.

If Uttara, kuru is part of the heavens, then, it probably forms a “quadrant” or “sector” of our world-system or universe. And Aparā, goyāna, Pubba, videha and Jambu, dīpa would then respectively be the west, the east and the south quadrants of our universe.¹¹¹

2.2.1.8 Although beliefs about the heavens and the hells (as reported in the Commentaries) seem to be spatial and locational, we must understand them in the spirit of early Buddhism. Firstly, such ideas are not to be taken as modern scientific description despite remarkable overlaps and similarities. These worlds are best understood as early Buddhist myths that work in tandem with the teachings on karma and rebirth—this is the cosmic stage on which our karma can fruit, so to speak. Even if such worlds leave much to our imagination, the sufferings and effects of karma are very real.

The mythical significance of such accounts of the heavens, non-humans and the hells should be understood in the spirit of such teachings; as those given in **the Pātāla Sutta** (S 36.4), where the Buddha declares:

¹⁰⁴ See Vism:Ñ 218 n14.

¹⁰⁵ Vism 7.42/206,9* = DhsA 298,18* = VA 1:119,16* = SnA 443, * ≈ J 6:125,14*.

¹⁰⁶ MA 2:303,6; SA 1:338,24; SnA 443,20, 485,5; J 1:202,13; DhA I 272,16; Nm 448,17; Vism 7.44/207,3.

¹⁰⁷ For a summary, see DPPN: cakkavāḷa.

¹⁰⁸ VA 1:120; DA 2:433; SA 2:290; SnA 1:290, 2:443; UA 140; ItA 1:128; DhsA 4, 297 f.

¹⁰⁹ See **Andha, kāra S** (S 56.46), SD 2.19 (10); **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14,1.18.2 n), SD 49.8a; **Acchariya, abbhuta S** (M 123,7.3), SD 52.2. See Vism:Ñ 218 n14 cakka-vāḷa.

¹¹⁰ D 3:201; SnA 1:369.

¹¹¹ If we collate these quadrants with the Star Trek TV series conception of their universe, we have the following: Jambu, dīpa (Alpha Quadrant), Aparā, goyāna (Beta Quadrant), Pubba, viedha (Gamma Quadrant) or Uttara, kuru (Delta Quadrant).

Bhikshus, when the uninstructed ordinary person makes the statement:

“In the great ocean there is a **bottomless abyss** (*pātāla*),” he makes such a statement about something that is non-existent and false.

This “bottomless abyss,” bhikshus, is only a designation (*adhivacana*) for painful bodily feelings.¹¹² (S 36.4,3-4/4:206), SD 2.25¹¹³

(3) THE COUNTRY (*padesa*)

2.2.1.9 The Bodhisattva’s 3rd investigation is the choice of the ideal country in which he should be born. Apparently, buddhas, pratyeka-buddhas, the chief disciples, the 80 great disciples, world monarchs and other powerful kshatriyas and brahmin householders of great wealth are born only in **the Middle Country** (*majjhima padesa*). What was so special about the Middle Country, and where was it located?

A specialist scholar of early Indian archaeology and history, **G Erdosi**, writes that by the 6th-4th centuries BCE, “the technological base of the economy in this period [had] already reached a level not to be significantly exceeded until the 20th century.” (1988: 112). The rise of urban centres in the central Gange-tic plain in this period and the production of food surplus were closely connected.

Broadcast rice (*vīhi*; Skt *vrīhi*) (*Oryza sativa*) had its origins in India around 3000 BCE and was certainly known to later Vedic people. It was a rainy season crop ripening in autumn but whose yield was limited. This form of rice when cooked is called **odana** (ts), “boiled rice (ready to be eaten).” (It should be noted that *odana* is also part of the name of the Buddha’s father, Suddhodana, “pure boiled rice.”)¹¹⁴

Change came when the ancient Indians learned paddy transplantation or wet paddy production, which grew rice as a winter crop. This better-quality winter rice was known as **sāli** (Skt *sāli*).¹¹⁵ This was the surplus that created and supported the institutions of kings and empires (Collins, 1993:309).¹¹⁶

2.2.1.10 The Commentary then quotes the Vinaya’s traditional definition of this region (notice that the designation begins with the east):

“To the east is market-town of Kajaṅgala,¹¹⁷ and beyond it is Mahā,sālā.¹¹⁸ Beyond that are the border districts; on this side are the middle districts.

In the middle of the south-eastern region is the river Salla,vatī.¹¹⁹ *Beyond that are the border districts; on this side are the middle districts.* To the south is the market-town of Seta,kaṅṅika.¹²⁰ *Beyond that are the border districts; on this side are the middle districts.*

¹¹² Cf **Ajjuna Tha** (Tha 88bc) & **Deva,sabha Tha** (Tha 89b) for similar figures. See also **Tāla,puṭa Tha** (Tha 1104) & SD 20.9 II:1104 & SD 10.9 (8.4.3).

¹¹³ For a scholarly survey of early Buddhist cosmography, see Sadakata 1997:19-40 (ch 1).

¹¹⁴ Rice-grain is *taṇḍula* (Malay, “beras”); the plant *vīhi* (Malay, “padi”); boiled rice *odana* (Malay, “nasi”).

¹¹⁵ R S Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India*, 1983:96, 161 f. Today, **sāli** (Skt *sāli*), winter rice or transplanted rice, is the predominant rice crop in NE India occupying about 70 per cent of the agricultural area and contributing some 75 per cent to the production. It is sown between June-July and harvested around Nov-Dec; hence, it is known as “winter rice.” It is generally grown in shallow rain-fed lowland, and in shallow flood-prone plains, and may be irrigated.

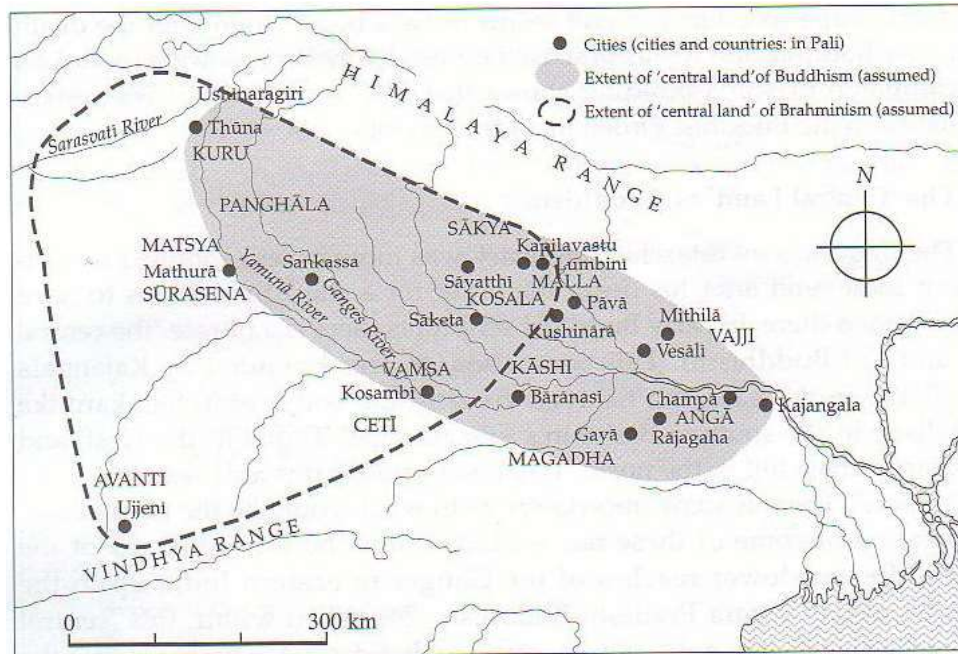
¹¹⁶ For other socioeconomic factors of the Ganges Plain during the Buddha’s time, see **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16), SD 9.

¹¹⁷ Kajaṅgala. See M 3:298; A 5:54; DA 429; J 3:226 f, 4:316. B C Law says that Kajaṅgala is identical with Ka-chu-wen-ki-lo, 羯蠅揭羅 *Jié yíng jiē luó* of Xuanzang, “which lay at a distance of above 400 li east from Champā (Bhāgal-pur)” (Law, 1932:2 n1); see T Watters vol 2, 1905:182 f. The scholiast tells us that there “wood supplies are easily gotten” (*dabba,sambhārā sulabhā*, J 4:311); J:R 4:196 n1 errs. **Bhagalpur** is today the 3rd largest city in Bihar state.

¹¹⁸ Called Mahā,sālā at J 1:49.

To the west is the brahmin village of Thūna.¹²¹ *Beyond that are the border districts; on this side are the middle districts.*

To the north are the mountains (*pabbata*) called Usīra-d,dhaja.¹²² *Beyond that are the border districts; on this side are the middle districts.*¹²³ (Mv 5.13.12 @ V 1:197)¹²⁴



The 'central land' of Buddhism and Brahminism

2.2.1.11 The Middle Country covers about a third of what is today called **the Great northern plains**, bounded by the Himalayas on the north, the Deccan plateau on the south, roughly 1000 km wide. The

¹¹⁹ Salla,vatī; also spelt Salala,vatī (J 1:40; DA 173 (with vll); KhpA 132); Salaḷa,vatī (MA 2:200 with vll); Salla,vattī (AA 1:97); Salala,vatī 1 (DPPN). B C Law seems to identify it with Sarāvati. Perhaps, this is [the Sarasvatī river](#) that arises in the Aravalli mountain range in Rajasthan, passing through Sidhpur and Patan before merging with the Rann of Kutch.

¹²⁰ Seta,kaṇṇika. Comys [2.2.1 n] only mention it as a market-town (*nigama*) marking the southern border of the Middle Country.

¹²¹ Thūna. See U 78; J 6:62; belonged to the Mallas (UA 377). B C Law identifies it with Sthāneśvara (1941:21 n1). He quotes Cunningham: *Ancient Geography of India*, 1871:xliv n2; 1924:xliv n2. Sthāneśvara is today [Thanesar](#), in Haryana state, north of Delhi.

¹²² Usīra-d,dhaja. B C Law identifies it with Uśīragiri, in the Sivalik mountain-range north of Kaṅkhal, quoting *India Antiqua* 1905:179 (Law 1941:21 n2; 1954:132). [Kaṅkhal](#) is a small colony in Haridwar, Haridwar District of Uttarakhand, north of Delhi, India. [Sivalik range](#) is just south of Jammu & Kashmir.

¹²³ J 2:49 omits this last designation. It adds that this whole area (the "Middle Country") is 300 yojanas long, 250 yojanas wide, and 900 yojanas in circumference (J 1:49). A *yojana*, "league," 11.25 km = 7 mi = 4 *gāvutas*. See SD 4.17 (1.2.2); SD 47.8 (2.4.4.1). This means the dimensions are: 3375 km (2097 mi) × 2813 km (1748 mi) × 10,125 km (6,291 mi).

¹²⁴ This def designates the "border districts" (*paccanta janapada*), where the Buddha allows suitable candidates "ordination by a group of 5 monks with a Vinaya expert" (*vinaya.dhara,pañcama gaṇa upasampadā*, V 1:197,19). Qu for defining the boundaries of the Middle Country (*majjhima,(pa)desa*) at J 1:49; DA 173; MA 2:200; AA 1:97; KhpA 132. For some of these names, see B C Law, *Geography of Early Buddhism*, 1932:2.

plain stretches for some 2,400 km from the Rājmahāl hills and Bhagalpur in the east to Allahabad (Uttar Pradesh) in the west.

In modern geographical terms, the range and location of the Middle Country, that is, **the middle Ganges plain** or central Gangetic plain, is roughly bounded by the southern borders of Kashmir in the north, the Aravalli range in the west, the Himalayan foothills of Assam and Bangladesh in the east, and the Chota Nagpur Plateau in the south.¹²⁵

It is drained by almost all of **India's great rivers**: the Yamuna, the Ganga, the Ghaghara, the Gandak, the Kosi and the Tista from the Himalayas in the north, and the Chambal, the Betwa, the Son and the Damodar from the plateau in the south. The whole region slopes towards the south and south-east towards the Ganges Delta and the Bay of Bengal.¹²⁶ Its area is about the size of peninsular Malaysia or the whole of the UK and Ireland.

During the 6th century BCE, the middle Ganges plain was undergoing “the 2nd urbanization”¹²⁷ and the Iron Age. Iron contributed to better and stronger structures, weapons, tools and vehicles. Kings were able to have larger and better armies, and to conquer large areas. The ensuing peace conducted to commerce and travel. Money economy (gold, silver, copper, etc) facilitated trade and labour specialization, which, in turn, gave greater wealth and leisure to the populace.¹²⁸ With surplus wealth and time, more people had time for religion or began to question the realities of life, especially with the rise of the urban crowd. This is the area traditionally called the “Middle Country,” the historical “Buddha land,” the space where the Buddha lived, walked and taught the Dharma.

This is the ideal geographical condition.

(4) THE FAMILY

2.2.1.12 Fourthly, the Bodhisattva considers the family into which he will be born for the last time. To be a credible teacher to the world, the Bodhisattva has to come from a respectable family. In ancient societies, it was usually either the priest (*brāhmaṇa*) class or the warrior (*khattiya*) class. In some societies, the ruler was both priest and warrior (such as in ancient Sumeria), but in India of the Buddha's time, the two classes were separate.

The brahmin class of India at that time had grown worldly and corrupt, and tried to maintain the caste or class system based on birth to give them dominance over the rest of society.¹²⁹ Their religion, Brahmanism, too, was corrupt—it was a priestcraft based on ritual social conduct (Skt *dharma*) and ritual religious action (Skt *karma*) with elaborate and expensive sacrifices and offerings.¹³⁰ The Bodhisattva chose not to arise in this class.

2.2.1.13 In the middle Ganges plain, **the kshatriyas** (*khattiya*)—the warriors and nobles, mostly engaged in agriculture and pastoralism¹³¹—were dominant. The kshatriyas were traditionally the landed

¹²⁵ The middle Ganges plain is the eastern swath of the Indo-Gangetic Plain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indo-Gangetic_Plain.

¹²⁶ For details, see <https://www.importantindia.com/8642/the-great-northern-plains-of-india/>.

¹²⁷ The 1st urbanization occurred with the Indus Valley civilization (3300-1300 BCE), a Bronze Age culture—esp with Harappa (Punjab, Pakistan, about 24 km (15 mi) west of Sahiwal) and Mohenjo-daro (Sindh, Pakistan).

¹²⁸ On the “2nd urbanization: the Ganges plain,” see Thapar, *Early India*, 2002:139-146.

¹²⁹ On caste in the middle Ganges plain around the Buddha's time, see Thapar 2002:122-126.

¹³⁰ On rituals and social exchange, see Thapar 2003:126-136.

¹³¹ On the kshatriyas as being agriculturally engaged, see **Aggaññā S** (D 27,21/3:93), SD 2.19. Also note Suddhodana's name, resolved as *suddha*, “pure” + *odana*, “rice,” which suggests a close connection with agriculture.

gentry—they had land and were the most powerful social class. But traditionally, real wealth then was measured by the number of cattle one possessed.¹³²

Apparently, the predominant clan amongst the kshatriyas were **the Sakyas**, with their capital at Kapila,vatthu¹³³ [3.1.2.2]. The Sakyas called themselves the “Solar Clan” (*ādicca,gotta*), tracing their descent right back to their very first descendent, king Okkaka¹³⁴ (Sanskrit, Ikṣvāku),¹³⁵ who, in turn, was directly descended from the very first king of civilized humans, Mahā,sammata (the great elect)—as recorded in **the Aggañña Sutta** (D 27).¹³⁶

When the Buddha first meets king Pasenadi, he introduces himself to the king as “an inhabitant of Kosala” (*kosalesu nīketino*), and adds:

*Ādiccā nāma gottena
sākiyā nāma jātiyā
tamhā kulā pabbajito’mhi rāja
na kāme abhipatthayam*

Ādicca [Solar] by clan [lineage],
Sakya by birth,
from that family, have I gone forth,
not wishing for any sensual pleasures.

(Sn 423), SD 49.19

The Buddha would himself claim that he is “the kinsman of the sun” (*ādicca,bandhu*),¹³⁷ a metaphor for awakening since the sun lights up the world and reveals things around us.

The earliest records we have (the suttas) do not mention the Sakyas as having a kingdom. The kings (*rāja*) like Bimbisāra and then his son, Ajāta,sattu, ruled over Magadha, and Pasenadi and then his son, Viḍūḍabha, ruled over Kosala, which were the heartlands of the Middle Country. The Sakyas governed over their chiefdoms (*gaṇa,saṅgha*), and who, unlike the kings, neither required rituals nor observed rules of class (*vaṇṇa*; Skt *varṇa*). They were spread out over the periphery of these kingdoms of the Ganges plain. These republican chiefdoms were located to the south of the Himalayas, especially its foothills, in north-western India, Punjab and Sind, and in Central and western India.¹³⁸

Realms, such as those of the Sakyas, the Koliyas and the Mallas, were republican oligarchies.¹³⁹ They elected their chiefs from time to time. Such leaders were probably called *rāja* (anglicized as “rajah”) or “kings,” but neither in the sense of absolute monarchy nor in the modern sense. Suddh’odana, the Buddha’s father, was probably the most prominent amongst the Sakya chiefs or rajahs. Their communal affairs—administrative, judicial and so on—were discussed and debated in a mote-hall (*santh’āgāra*).¹⁴⁰ There was a mote-hall in the Sakya capital, Kapila,vatthu.¹⁴¹ Another of their mote-hall was at Cātumā.¹⁴² As warriors, they excelled in sports. A Sakya family called Vedhañña even ran a school of archery.¹⁴³

¹³² Dhaniya, son of a Videha seth, owns 30,000 head of cattle, of which 27,000 are milch cows (SnA 1:26): see **Dhaniya S** (Sn 1.2), SD 50.20 (2.1.2). Mendaka of Bhaddiya,nagara in Aṅga owns even more cattle, employing 1250 cowherds (*go,pālaka*) to care for them and to donate milk to just as many monks each time (V 1:244). See Nakamura 2000:42.

¹³³ On the identification and location of Kapila,vatthu, see Nakamura 2000:48-54.

¹³⁴ Sn 991. See Thomas 1949:7-13.

¹³⁵ See Nakamura 2000:30 f.

¹³⁶ For a genealogy table of the Sakyas going back to the Mahā,sammata (the great elect) (Dīpv ch 3; Mahv ch 2), see Nakamura 2000:44-46. On Sakya ancestry, see Strong 2009:48-50. On *mahā,sammata*, see **Aggañña S** (D 27,20-21), SD 2.19.

¹³⁷ On *ādicca,bandha*, see V 2:296,17* = A 2:54,8*; D 2:287,21*, 3:197,14*; S 1:192,6* = Tha 1237d; Sn 915a; S 1:186,1* = Tha 1212; Tha 26, 1023;Vv 226, 869.

¹³⁸ On the sociopolitical conditions of the region then, see Thapar 2002:117-122 (chief and kinds); 137-147 (states and cities).

¹³⁹ An oligarchy is rule by a small group of people, usu the elite of society.

¹⁴⁰ See Nakamura 2000:36.

¹⁴¹ **Ambaṭṭha S** (D 3,1.13/1:91), SD 21.3.

2.2.1.14 As far as we know from the suttas there is no mention that the Bodhisattva’s father, **Suddh’odana** (“pure rice”) is the “king” (*rāja*), or even a king, of the Sakyas [2.2.1.13 n]. The post-canonical works mention his brothers as Dhot’odana (“washed rice”), Sakk’odana (“able rice”), Sukk’odana (“white rice”) and Amit’odana (“immeasurable rice”), and his sisters were Amitā and Pamtā. Their parents are Sīha, -hanu and Kaccānā. Suddhodana’s chief queen was Mahā Māyā, and after her death, her sister Pajā,patī (fully, Mahā Pajā,patī Gotamī), was raised to her position.¹⁴⁴ They all—including the Buddha—belonged to the Gotama clan (*gotta*).¹⁴⁵ This is the ideal cultural condition.

2.2.1.15 Why didn’t the Bodhisattva choose to be born into one of the royal families of, say, Bimbisāra of Magadha or of Pasenadi of Kosala? One obvious reason was that these royal families were ridden with intrigues. Bimbisāra was killed by his own son, Ajāta,sattu, and Pasenadi was betrayed by his own commander-in-chief Dīgha,kārāyana, who made Pasenadi’s half-caste son, Viḍūḍabha, king, leaving Pasenadi freezing to his death alone outside the Rājagaha city-gate.¹⁴⁶

Pasenadi and the Buddha were of the same age,¹⁴⁷ and they first met when the Buddha was newly awakened.¹⁴⁸ The Dhammapada Commentary tells us that king Pasenadi, wishing to win the favour of the Buddha and his monks, decided to marry a Sakya princess. The bigger picture was that by this state marriage, Kosala and the Sakyas were effectively bound together politically. In fact, in **the Dhamma, cetiya Sutta** (M 89), king Pasenadi refers to the Buddha as a “Kosalan,” which shows that the Sakyas are then subject to Kosala.¹⁴⁹ [2.2.1.18]

2.2.1.16 The proud Sakyas were strictly endogamous, desiring to keep their warrior-lineage pure. However, not wanting to displease Pasenadi, they offered him Vasabha,khattiyā, daughter of Mahānāma (the Buddha’s uncle). But, unbeknown to the king, she was really Mahānāma’s daughter by a slave-girl.¹⁵⁰ By the time Pasenadi discovered this, he had already sired prince Viḍūḍabha by her. Fortunately, the king deeply respected the Buddha, who related a similar past event by way of **the Kaṭṭha,hārika Jātaka** (J 7)¹⁵¹ and taught him Dharma.

Moved by the Buddha, Pasenadi restored Vasabha,khattiyā and Viḍūḍabha to their royal positions. However, the young prince Viḍūḍabha, sorely humiliated by the whole affair, secretly vowed vengeance. His opportunity came when Dīgha,kārāyana stole away with Pasenadi’s fivefold regalia while he was in the Buddha’s fragrant cell conversing with him, and made Viḍūḍabha king [2.2.1.15]. King Viḍūḍabha went on to massacre almost the whole of the Sakya clan.¹⁵²

¹⁴² **Cātumā S** (M 67,6/1:457), SD 34.7. The Mallā had their mote-hall in Kusinārā (**Mahā,parinibbāna S**, D 16,6.23-2:164), SD 9; the Licchavī had theirs at Vesālī (Mv 6.31.1 @ V 1:233); **Cūḷa Saccaka S** (M 35,5/1:228), SD 26.5.

¹⁴³ **Pāsādika S** (D 29,1/3:117), SD 40a.6. They have a long mansion (*dīgha,pāsāda*) in their mango grove where they give archery lessons (DA 3:905).

¹⁴⁴ J 1:15; Mahv 2.15 f; Dīpv 3.45.

¹⁴⁵ On the name **Gotama** and the Buddha’s worldly lineage, see Nakamura 2000:41-46.

¹⁴⁶ **Dhamma, cetiya S** (M 89/2:118-125; MA 3:352-355; DhA 1:356; J 4:151 f).

¹⁴⁷ **Dhamma, cetiya S** (M 89,19/2:124), SD 64.10.

¹⁴⁸ Their first meeting is prob recorded in **Dahāra S** (S 3.1), SD 42.11.

¹⁴⁹ **Aggañña S** (D 27): “Now, the Sakyans are vassals (*anuyuttā*) of the king of Kosala. They offer him humble service and salute him, rise and do him homage and pay him fitting service.” (D 27/3:83), SD 2.19; **Dhamma, cetiya S** (M 89,19/2:124), SD 64.10; Sn 423 [2.2.1.13].

¹⁵⁰ DhA 1:345-349.

¹⁵¹ J 7/1:133-136.

¹⁵² DhA 1:357-361.

2.2.1.17 Despite the royal intrigues, the kings—such as Bimbisāra of Magadha and Pasenadi of Kosala—managed to conquer and unite large swaths of land. These kings were related by blood—Ajātasattu, the son of Bimbisāra, for example, was Pasenadi’s nephew. By the Buddha’s time, **the kingdoms**—especially Magadha—was able to destroy or absorb the republican chiefdoms. The days of the Indian empire were just beginning. [2.2.1.15]

In 326 BCE, **Alexander the Great** and his army reached the western borders of Magadha. Fortunately for the Indians, the Greeks, after a decade of warfare across southern Asia were tired and homesick, and refused to advance beyond the Beas¹⁵³ to invade India. After less than a decade from Alexander’s arrival on the Indian borders, the Nanda dynasty (345-321 BCE) ended and Chandragupta initiated **the Maurya dynasty** (322-180 BCE). Its greatest emperor, Asoka (reigned c268-c232 BCE) built India’s largest empire and reigned over almost the whole of India, and which also brought Buddhism to new social heights and global spread. The days of empire that began in the Buddha’s time culminated in the Asokan empire.¹⁵⁴

2.2.1.18 Around the 5th century BCE, northern India was politically divided into 16 major or great states (*soḷasa mahājanapadā*). Among these countries, the early Buddhists distinguished between two kinds of territories: **the middle country** (*majjhima, desa*), where the Buddhist discipline is vigorously applied, and **the frontier regions** (*paccanta, janapada*) which are allowed some concessions (V 1:197). We have already noted its area [2.2.1.11].

The middle region or Middle Country, which roughly corresponded to the ancient **Āryāvarta** (Skt), comprised 14 of the major states with its 7 capitals or principal towns, that is to say: Sāvattihī (Kosala), Sāketa (Kosala), Campā (Aṅga), Bārāṇasī (Kāśī), Vesālī (Vajjī), Rājagaha (Magadha) and Kosambī (Vaṃsā) (D 2:146). The other great states in the Middle Country were Malla, Cetī, Kuru, Pañcāla, Maccha, Sūrasena, Assaka and Avantī. Beyond these states lay Kambojā (SW Kashmir and Kafiristan) and Gandhāra (Peshawar valley and Potohar valley; Jalalabad and Peshawar areas in Afghanistan).¹⁵⁵

Some of these 16 great states, such as **Kāśī, Kosala, Kuru-Pañcāla, Maccha, Gandhārā and Kambojā**, had existed long before and were mentioned in Vedic literature. The rest, such as Aṅga, Magadha, Vajjī, Malla, Cetī, Vacchā, Sūrasena, Assaka and Avantī, were new states that arose from declining old ones or were areas coming into prominence.¹⁵⁶

The autocratic monarchies (*rajja*) were Kosala, Magadha, Vaṃsā and Avantī. Kosala had annexed Kāśī; Magadha had annexed Aṅga; Vaṃsā had annexed Cetī; and Avantī had annexed Assaka. Pasenadi, in fact, had peacefully annexed the Sakyas. It should also be noted that the Sakyas, although a powerful nation, was not included amongst the 16 great countries, since they were tributaries of Kosala. From all this, we must conclude that the power and independence of Sakyas as a nation had waned. [2.2.1.15]

(5) THE MOTHER

2.2.1.19 The 5th and final investigation made by the Bodhisattva is that of the ideal mother who would give birth to him. He finds the ideal candidate in queen Mahā Māyā, since her life would be 10 lunar months and 7 days from her conception of the Bodhisattva in his last birth [2.2.1.21]. The Sanskrit

¹⁵³ The river Beas (Gk Hyphasis) rises in the Himalayas in central Himachal Pradesh, and flows some 470 km (290 mi) into the Sutlej river at the SW boundary of Kapurthala district of Punjab. Reportedly, Alexander, after conceding to his soldiers’ refusal to advance into India, had 12 immense altars to the Greek gods built as thanksgiving to them for safely bringing his armies thus far—this confluence marked that spot, but, apparently, at that time, it was 64 km (40 mi) below the current confluence.

¹⁵⁴ See Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magadha>.

¹⁵⁵ For a table of the 16 great states, see SD 9 (16.1).

¹⁵⁶ For other political factors of the Buddha’s time, see **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16), SD 9 (16).

Lalita,vistara,¹⁵⁷ however, does not mention the parents here, but the Bodhisattva describes the 64 qualities required for the family, and 32 for the mother. From these, the devas identify the parents.

The Bodhisattva then took leave of the devas and descended into his mother's womb. The Lalita,-vistara adds that Śveta,ketu (the Buddha-to-be) then removes his crown and places it on the head of the Bodhisattva Maitreya (Pali, *metteyya*) to take over his lordship over Tusita. Maitreya will be the Buddha to come after Gotama, that is, the last of the 5 buddhas of our world-cycle.

2.2.1.20 The Lalita,Vistara relates the Buddha's life in hyperbolic language with exuberant descriptions of his powers and numinous personality. Amongst the miraculous episodes are his walking the first 7 steps as soon as he is born, and the gods coming down from their pedestals to worship him in a temple he visits, and also Ānanda's warning that there will be fools who will not believe such miracles, who will be reborn in Avīci (the lowest) hell.

Such stories very likely influenced the development of the Mahāyāna conception of the Buddha's "3 bodies" (*trikāya*). It also shows signs of being reworked along Mahāyāna lines, since it includes allusions to key Mahāyāna terms such as Tathāgata,garbha (the Buddha-seed teaching), "suggesting that it went through continued, even radical, embellishment after its initial composition."¹⁵⁸

2.2.1.21 The best known attempt at a full-length complete biography of the Buddha is **the Buddha,-carita**. There are actually two works of this same name: the first, by the monk Saṅgha,rakṣa (c 1st cent CE), survives only in Chinese translation. The second—which is very popular across Asia—is by Aśvaghōṣa. Like the Lalita,Vistara, which portrays the Buddha in miraculous and fabulous terms as a superhuman hero, **the Buddha,-carita** (Acts of the Buddha), too, is royally fabulous in its own way. But it also attempts to give a continuous narrative, intended as a complete life of the Buddha.

The work—in high court poetry or *kāvya*—is characterised by lengthy digressions and elaborate descriptions. It begins with a description of the Buddha's parents and ends with the events that follow immediately after his death. Of the 87 verses of canto 5, for example, 19 of them (Buc 5.47-65) describe, in great detail, the sight of the sleeping women in the mansion, preceding the Bodhisattva's renunciation. The work is, in part, rife with sensuality.

Its author, the philosopher-poet **Aśva,ghoṣa** (c 2nd cent), the court poet to king Kanishka (reigned c127-c150),¹⁵⁹ and his brahmin-preceptor. When he lost a public debate with the Vaibhāṣika teacher, Pārśva (some say with his pupil, Puṇya,yaśas), he converted to Buddhism and became a monk.¹⁶⁰ His magnum opus, however, reveals some interesting truths about him—and the source of some of our popular stories of the Bodhisattva.

Patrick Olivelle notes that "The poem is an 'apologia' for Buddhism against Brahmanical attacks and arguments."¹⁶¹ Jonathan Walters gives us more critical details. He notes that the Pali Canon nowhere mentions the Buddha's royal birth as traditionally presented in his modern biographies. In fact, the earli-

¹⁵⁷ **Lalita,vistara** ("the Elaborate Sport"), a relatively late treatment of the Buddha's life in mixed prose and verse, 3rd or 4th cent CE, prob of the Sarvāsti,vāda. The work relates the Buddha's life from the Bodhisattva's sojourn in Tusita to the teaching of the 1st discourse, ie, the establishing of the dispensation (*sāsana*). See SD 49.18 (1.1.4.7). For Skt of Lalitavistara (based on ed P L Vaidya, 1958): [GRETIL](#).

¹⁵⁸ Princeton Dict of Buddhism, 2014:464. It is preserved in two Chin trs: the Puyao Jing, tr Dharmarakṣa (308) and the Fangguang da zhuan yan jing, tr Divākara (683). The Newari Buddhist tradition of Nepal includes the Lalita,Vistara amongst its 9 principal books of the Mahāyāna (*nava,grantha* or *nava,dharma*).

¹⁵⁹ The Kushans were a metropolitan empire of the Yuezhi (or Indo-Scyth) covering most of Afghanistan today, esp Bactria and Gandhāra, up to NW India, from the early 1st cent. They promoted Mahāyāna, incorporating into it many other deities and doctrines, and facilitated the spread of Mahāyāna to China (and East Asia).

¹⁶⁰ See Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism: Aśvaghōṣa.

¹⁶¹ P Olivelle (tr), *Life of the Buddha by Aśvaghōṣa*, NY, 2008:xix.

est text appears to be Aśvaghōṣa's **Buddha,carita**,¹⁶² in which “the Buddha's royal birth, connections, and status are highlighted almost to the point of absurdity” (Walters 1993:275). Apparently, Aśvaghōṣa had good reasons, and the opportunity, for attributing royal status to the Buddha and his family. Aśvaghōṣa, as we have noted, served in the court of the Kushan emperor Kanishka who promoted Mahāyāna as a tool for consolidating his empire.

It is even more interesting to note that the **Buddha,carita** became the model for classical Sanskrit court poetry, which, remarks Walters, because it is “rare to have Buddhist classical Sanskrit at all, especially weird because this biography became definitive of a genre of theist court poetry” (1993:275 f). Walters further notes that Aśvaghōṣa,

... a converted Brahmin, as far as I know the first biographer to draw explicit parallels to the Rāmāyāna, to justify apparent Buddhist deviance from Vedic precedents with an appeal to different Vedic precedents, and to diffuse the “God begs Buddha to Preach” segment by having Indra come down instead of Brahmā, more as a sort of friendly call than as a charge to preach (Aśvaghōṣa's Bodhisattva already knows he is going to preach). (Walters 1993:275 f)

Such a work would give Aśvaghōṣa “a sharp social edge ... while adding a level of aesthetic quality and completeness to the Buddha biography that had never been achieved before.” (Walters 1993:276)

Since the early canonical accounts do not provide a continuous Buddha biography, the **Buddha,carita** apparently provides a literary narrative from his birth to his death—but, as scholars have noted, with a significant number of details that he had himself fabricated and interpolated. Only the first half of the work is extant in its original Sanskrit. The rest survives only in Tibetan and Chinese translations.¹⁶³ For a canonical life of the Buddha, however, we must turn to the suttas as the most reliable sources, such as **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26)¹⁶⁴ (Walters 1993:270 f).

2.2.1.22 In the early texts, the Buddha's mother is called **Māyā** and his father, **Suddh'odana**¹⁶⁵ [2.2.1.14]. Hence, they are likely to be historical persons (at least to the sutta compilers).¹⁶⁶ She is called “queen” (*devī*) in **the Mahā'padāna Sutta** (D 14).¹⁶⁷ Without quoting any sources, Nakamura says that “In ancient India, *māyā* meant ‘mysterious spiritual power of a deity’ [‘divine mystique’], and that only in later times, it means ‘illusion’.” He advises against associating the latter sense with Mahā Māyā. (2000:47)

Her full appellation, then, would be “queen Mahā Māyā Gotamī” (*mahā māyā gotamī devī*), but there seems to be no reference to this in the suttas. The closest we have is in **the Cariyā,piṭaka Commentary**, that is, as “Queen Gotamī, Mahā Māyā,” *gotamī devī mahā,māyā* (CA 62).

¹⁶² Buddhacarita: partial ed & tr E H Johnston, *The Buddhacarita or Acts of the Buddha*, 2 vols, Calcutta, 1936, repr 1972, 1978. Chinese: *Fo suo hsing tsan ching* (T192). Tibetan: mdo'grel (skyes.rab) (nge), 1-124b; ed Friedrich Weller, *Das Leben des Buddha von Aśvaghōṣa*, parts 1 (1926) and 2 (1928), Leipzig. For complete list, see main Bibliography.

¹⁶³ Princeton Dict of Buddhism, 2014:150 f.

¹⁶⁴ M 26 (SD 1.11).

¹⁶⁵ Buc 1.1 mentions Śuddhodana and 1.2 mentions Mahā,māyā.

¹⁶⁶ The Buddha was born into the Sakya clan (no mention of Māyā) (Thī 192). Parents mentioned; Māyā rejoices in the “triple heaven” (*tidivasmi modati*) (Tha 534): Comy glosses *tidivasa* (Be *tidivamhi*) as Tusita heaven (ThaA 2:225). *Tidiva* means “the (third) heaven” (S 1:181,8*; A 3:40,19*; Vv 53.4; Tha 534; J 3:194,31*). Māyā called Gotamī, her rebirth in heaven (Tha 535).

¹⁶⁷ **Mahā'padāna S** (D 14) states that she is called *devī* (D 14,1.12.2(7)/2:7, 3.30/252), SD 49.8a+b. Cf AA 1:405*.

2.2.1.23 Mahā Māyā provided the Bodhisattva with the ideal human condition for his advent. This was perhaps the most difficult of the Bodhisattva’s 5 investigations to explain in our terms today. We may hazard two explanations. The first—the traditional explanation—is that the Bodhisattva is to appear as a “unique being.” If he were to have someone to “mother” him, he would probably be more easily comforted, for example, when he was traumatized by the 4 sights [7.2.1]. Such a mother was likely to produce more children who would be his siblings, which bring about “sibling rivalries,” or his disciples might see them as legitimate successors to his “Buddhahood,” making it a hierarchical lineage—which has occurred in Chan Buddhism, for example.

The second reason—the practical (or modern) explanation—likely to be one proposed by a modern “pragmatic” Buddhist, is to resign ourselves to the fact that the Bodhisattva simply *lost his mother when only a week old*. The lack of a mother-figure must have traumatized him, even caused him difficulties in relating to women. Personally, I disagree with this second explanation: it is simply patronizing and arbitrary. For example, we can also rationalize that the loss of a mother may be compensated by a healthy, wealthy and powerful young man to womanize and live a life of utter pleasure. But for the Bodhisattva, it is just the opposite.

2.2.1.24 My approach is basically to respect the suttas, even the commentarial accounts. The ancient reciters and commentators must surely have good reasons for relating to us the Buddha’s life, or in explaining its extraordinariness or difficulties in their own way. We must carefully examine the canonical accounts in their contexts and in the light of intertextual connections (similar occurrences or connections in other suttas). As for commentarial explanations, they may be influenced by the commentator’s time or locale. We can, of course, make proper adjustments to such difficulties, even as the commentators themselves dealt with such issues in their own time. Such issues will somehow resolve themselves if we are warmly guided by our interest in understanding the Buddha as a person in the light of our practice of the Dharma, especially of mental cultivation. [1.5.2.6].

[2.2.2 The App’āyuka Sutta \(U 5.2\)](#)

2.2.2.1 There is a sutta that especially addresses the brevity of queen Mahā Māyā’s life: **the App’-āyuka Sutta** (U 5.2). It records how Ānanda laments the brevity of Māyā’s life. The Buddha basically agrees with him, but further says something like, “We lose those whom we hold dear—that’s the nature of life. This is what Dharma training is all about. Impermanence!”

SD 52.1(2.2.2)

App’āyuka Sutta

The Discourse on the Short-lived | **U 5.2/42/47 f**

Traditional: **U 5.2** = (Khuddaka Nikāya 3) Udāna 5, Soṇa Vagga 2

Theme: Queen Mahā Māyā’s short life

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time, the Blessed One was staying in Anātha,piṇḍika’s park monastery in Jeta’s grove, outside Rājagaha.

Ānanda marvels at Mahā Māyā’s short life

2 Then, the venerable [48] Ānanda, having emerged in the evening from his solitary retreat, approached the Blessed One. Having saluted the Blessed One, he sat down at one side.

3 Seated thus at one side, the venerable Ānanda said to the Blessed One:

“It is marvelous indeed, bhante! It’s amazing, indeed, bhante!

That the Blessed One’s mother, bhante, was of short life-lived,¹⁶⁸

that the Blessed One’s mother finished her time when the Blessed One was born,¹⁶⁹

and then, after 7 days, arose in the Tusita host (of contented devas).”

The Buddha’s response

4 “(So it is, Ānanda!)¹⁷⁰ So it is, Ānanda,

that the mothers of Bodhisattvas, Ānanda, are short-lived;

the mothers of Bodhisattvas finish their time when Bodhisattvas have been born,

and then, after seven days, arise in the Tusita host (of contented devas).”

5 Then, the Blessed One, understanding the significance of the occasion, uttered this udana [inspired utterance]:¹⁷¹

The udana

6 *Ye keci bhūtā bhavissanti*

ye cāpi sabbe gamissanti pahāya dehaṃ

taṃ sabbaṃ jānīm kusalo viditvā

ātāpiyo brahma, cariyāṃ careyyāti

Whoever have become, will become,

or whatever, all will move on after leaving the body.

The one skilled, having understood how the all is lost—

ardent, they should live the holy life.

— evaṃ —

2.2.2.2 Dhammapāla, in his *Param’attha, dīpanī* (the Commentary on the Udāna),¹⁷² is clearly concerned over the issue of Mahā Māyā’s brief life. He gives 3 explanations (UA 2:276-279), of which we will give a paraphrased summary here.¹⁷³ These explanations seem almost like an apologia, in which he famously plays Māra’s advocate by presenting 3 possible scenarios for explaining Māyā’s short life.

In the 1st explanation, he alludes to the foundation of the nuns’ order, the “fourth assembly” (*catuttha parisā*). Some, he argues, may speculate that if Mahā Māyā were to live a long normal life, like her younger sister, Mahā Pajāpatī Gotamī, “and the Blessed One, out of great regard for his mother, would have easily allowed women to be given the going-forth and ordination” (*bhagavā ca mātari bahu, mānena mātu, gāmassa sāsane pabbajjāṃ upasampadañ ca sukhen’eva anujāneyya*). But on account of Māyā’s short life, this is not possible.

However, Dhammapāla rejects such a speculation as being “unreasonable” (*akāraṇaṃ*, “without reason”). “For the Blessed One, in allowing the going-forth in his teaching, be it to his mother or to any other woman, did so in a grave manner, not lightly, out of the desire for the longevity (of the teaching).¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁸ *Yāvad app’āyukā hi bhante bhagavā mātā ahoṣi.*

¹⁶⁹ *Sattāha.jāto bhagavati bhagavato mātā kalam akāsi tusita, kāyāṃ upapajjatīti*

¹⁷⁰ So Be (vl), Se.

¹⁷¹ *Atha kho bhagavā etam atthaṃ viditvā tāyaṃ velāyaṃ imaṃ udānaṃ udānesi.*

¹⁷² That is, the *udān’atthakathā* = *udāna* (inspired utterances) + *aṭṭha, kathā* (“meaning-talk,” commentary).

¹⁷³ Peter Masefield’s tr of the whole comy can be found at UA:M 2:732-736.

¹⁷⁴ *Bhagavā hi mātuyā vā aññassa vā mātu, gāmassa attano sāsane pabbajjāṃ anujānanto garukaṃ yeva katvā anujānāti, na lahukaṃ cira-ṭṭhiti, kāmatāyāti.* (UA 2:277)

2.2.2.3 The 2nd explanation Dhammapāla presents is regarding **Māyā's personal dignity as the Buddha's mother**. For 10 lunar months, she had sustained the Teacher in her womb. Since the Teacher is “the foremost individual in the world” (*loke agga, puggalam*), and she is the Buddha's mother (*buddha, -mātā*), she should not raise anyone else¹⁷⁵ (*sā buddha, mātā kassaci parihārikā bhavissatīti ayuttam idam*, UA 2:277). The idea here, I think, is to highlight the immensely good karma for Mahā Māyā to take the role of *the Buddha's mother*, and that she should be acknowledged for it by an almost immediate rebirth in the Tusita heavens.

2.2.2.4 For the 3rd explanation Dhammapāla presents the rule of the “nature of things” (*dhammatā*)—technically, the 5th of the 5 natural orders (*pañca, niyāma*).¹⁷⁶ Just as it is the “natural order” of things the mothers of Bodhisattvas die on the 7th day after delivering, the Buddha declares, “Ānanda, so it is!” and so on [§4]—this is in reference to the natural order of nature (*dhamma, niyāma*).

So, too, it is the natural order of nature that “all bodhisattvas, having fulfilled their perfections” (*śabbe bodhisattā pāramiyo pūretvā*) in Tusita, remain there for their lifespan. Then, when requested by the devas, they would descend into the world to gain awakening. Before doing so, the bodhisattvas would make the 5 investigations, including finding the ideal mother, one who will live for only for 10 months and 7 days after conception. It is the nature of things “that the mothers of bodhisattvas are of short lifespan” [§4].

The term “nature of things” (*dhammatā*) is especially prominent in **the Mahā'padāna Sutta** (D 14) [2.3.1.3].

2.2.2.5 The 5 natural orders (*pañca, niyāma*) are a set of teachings introduced in the Commentaries to help us understand that *not everything is due to karma*. Ironically, in Dhammapāla's 3rd explanation for Māyā's short life, the impression we get is just the contrary: it is the “nature of things” that she is short-lived. This 5th natural order seems to be a special proviso for any kind of inexplicable or troubling event.

The main problem with Dhammapāla's 3rd explanation is that it borders on the notion of fatalism (it is Māyā's fate to be short-lived) or determinism (it is already predetermined that she would be short-lived). Both these notions are against the Buddhist teaching of **karma**. In other words, the 3rd explanation seems over-stretched and unnecessary.

The first two explanations should suffice to explain the reason for Māyā living for only 10 lunar months and a week after conception in terms of her being the Buddha's mother and her being reborn in Tusita. Both are the fruits of her own immensely good karma. [4.6]

2.2.3 A “human” Buddha

2.2.3.1 Another very significant issue is that of **the Buddha assuming a human birth**, and not any other sentient form. That the Buddha is born of a human woman means that he is a historical human figure. This means two significant things.

The first significance of the Buddha assuming a human birth is simply that he arises in human history: whatever miraculous accounts or superhuman qualities we attribute to him, below all this mythical façade and veneer is a warm-blooded human, just like us. He is not some cosmic being or eternal essence whom we look up to or worship, but is really beyond us. As a human, he understands the human

¹⁷⁵ Here, I follow Ce *parihārikā*, rather than Be Ee Se *paricārikā*, (“a servant (to others),” which if followed by Masefield in US:M 734 + 799 n54).

¹⁷⁶ The 5 natural orders (*pañca, niyāma*) are those of (1) heat (*utu, niyāma*), (2) heredity (*bija, niyāma*, “order of seeds”), (3) karma (*kamma, niyāma*), (4) mental processes (*citta, niyāma*), and (5) of nature (*dhamma, niyāma*). The last order is meant here. See SD 5.6 (2).

conditions, and has the capacity to understand the nature and value of life, and the potential for awakening.

It's ironic that the Mahāyāna champion themselves as vowing to become Buddhas, but none of them can ever really become Amitābha or Avalokiteśvara—except perhaps in a political or feudalistic hierarchical sense. We are then no more talking about the Buddha as the awakened one, but some kind of God-head, able to emanate or “incarnate” themselves into “chosen” humans so that they have power over others, and enjoy property and pleasure that are beyond their own donors and devotees. We have conscripted the Buddha-idea to legitimize rulership and religiosity by *family, sex and genes* instead of by personal worth and spiritual transformation.¹⁷⁷

2.2.3.2 The second significance of the Buddha taking human birth is that while he lives he embodies what he practises and those who attend to his teachings will attain the same awakening as he has. After his passing, the Dharma that he has discovered remains [1.5.1.4]. After the Buddha's passing, the Dharma is still our refuge—even more so, we should all the more then take the Dharma as our only refuge, as the Buddha exhorts in his last days:

... dwelt with yourself as an island, with yourself as refuge, with no other refuge—
 dwell with the Dharma as an island, with the Dharma as refuge, with no other refuge.
 (D 16,2.26 = 26,1, 26,27; S 22.4, 47.9, 47.13, 47.14)¹⁷⁸

When we properly follow the Dharma, we will attain the same awakening—become arhats—like the Buddha himself [1.5.2.1]. Or, if, for any reason, we are not able to attain arhathood, we can still work for **streamwinning** in this life itself.¹⁷⁹

The Buddha is dead; long live the Dharma! Let us live the Dharma!

2.3 THE DESCENT

2.3.1 The Mahā'padāna Sutta account

2.3.1.1 The Bodhisattva's descent is an ancient story, recorded in one of the oldest texts of the Pali Canon, the Sutta Nipāta, in **the Sāriputta Sutta** (Sn 4.16) which opens with the verse:

<p><i>Na me diṭṭho ito pubbe icc-āyasma sāriputto na-s,suto uda (kassaci) evaṃ vaggi,vado satthā tusitā gaṇi-m-āgato</i></p>	<p>“I've not even till now seen,” said the venerable Sāriputta, “Nor heard from anyone, of a teacher with such a lovely voice, a leader who has come from Tusita.”¹⁸⁰</p>	<p>(Sn 955)</p>
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¹⁷⁷ See eg Michael Franz, *Rule By Incarnation*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982.

¹⁷⁸ **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,2.26/2:100), SD 9.1 = **Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda S** (D 26,1/3:58 = 27/3:77), SD 36.10; **Atta,dīpa S** (S 22.43/3:42), SD 93.8; **(Bhagavā) Gilāna S** (S 47.9/5:154); **(Satipaṭṭhāna) Cunda S** (S 47.13/5:163); **Ukka,celā S** (S 47.14/5:164 f).

¹⁷⁹ See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

¹⁸⁰ *Gaṇim-āgato*: this can be tr as “the group-leader or teacher who has come” or “who has come with a group.” However, we know that the Bodhisattva has descended from Tusita alone. Clearly here, Sāriputta is addressing the Buddha as the leader of his group of disciples (which is probably still small at that time). Comy glosses *gaṇi* with “the state of being a group's teacher” (*gaṇ'ācariyattā gaṇi*, SnA 571,29).

2.3.1.2 Many wondrous and marvellous events attended his conception and birth. The most detailed of the canonical accounts of these marvels and miracles are found in **the Acchariya-b, bhūta Sutta** (M 123).¹⁸¹ A more detailed account—a commentarial one—is found in **the Jātaka Nidāna** (J 1:47-54). An even more elaborate and colourful narrative of the Bodhisattva’s conception and birth, often more imaginative than the early canonical versions, is found in **the Mahā, vastu**¹⁸² and **the Lalita, vistara** [2.2.1.19-20].

2.3.1.3 The Mahā’padāna Sutta (D 14) describes the Bodhisattva Vipassī’s descent and conception, and his mother. Of all the Buddhas mentioned in the suttas, **Vipassī** has the longest and most detailed biography and personal details.¹⁸³ In fact, most of the familiar details of the life of Gotama that we know come from the Vipassī story. His life-story serves as a kind of template for the stories of other buddhas, with the appropriate changes (names, parents, bodhi tree, etc).

Here is a full account of the Bodhisattva Vipassī before his birth, that is, from the descent up to his gestation period (9 episodes) in his mother’s womb, as given in **the Mahā’padāna Sutta** (D 14)—with parallels in **the Acchariya, abbhūta Sutta** (M 123).¹⁸⁴ Note that the refrain for every episode is the same: “This is the nature of things (*dharmatā*) here.”

(1) THE DESCENT

1.17 Now, bhikshus, the Bodhisattva Vipassī, having passed away [having fallen] from the Tusita host (of contented gods), **descends** with mindfulness and comprehension into his mother’s womb.¹⁸⁵

This is the nature of things¹⁸⁶ here.

(2) THE CONCEPTION

1.18 It is the nature of things,¹⁸⁷ bhikshus, when the Bodhisattva, falling from the Tusita host, *mindfully and fully comprehending, descends into his mother’s womb*,¹⁸⁸

then, in the world with its gods, with its maras and its brahmas, this¹⁸⁹ generation with its recluses and brahmins, its rulers¹⁹⁰ and people,

¹⁸¹ M 123/3:118-124 (SD 52.2).

¹⁸² **Mvst vol 2** begins with the Bodhisattva in Tusita up to Yaśodharā (Mvst 2:1-48). A break with Jātaka stories follows. Then, follows 2 accounts of the great renunciation (Mvst 2:115-166). Mvst **vol 1** (1:196-231) gives an account of the Bodhisattva Dīpaṅkara in Tusita up to his awakening. Where the episodes overlap, the words are mutatis mutandis identical, too. On the Mahā, vastu, see SD 49.18 (1.1.4.7).

¹⁸³ On the Buddha Vipassī, see **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14), SD 49.8a (2). See SD 49.8b (1.0.2.3).

¹⁸⁴ M 123 (SD 52.2).

¹⁸⁵ **Pañca Pubba, nimitta S** (It 83) lists these 5 omens (*pañca pubba, nimitta*) by which a deva knows of his impending death (*cuti*): (1) his garlands wither, (2) his garments become soiled, (3) his armpits exude sweat, (4) his body gives a foul smell, (5) he delights not in his heavenly seat (It 83, SD 23.8a(1.2); also at DA 2:427 f).

¹⁸⁶ “Nature of things,” *dharmatā*. According to Comy, the marvellous nature of the buddhas, such as Gotama, comes under the 5th of the “5 natural orders” (*pañca, niyāma*)—those of heat, of heredity (*utu, niyāma*), of karma (*kamma, niyāma*), of mental processes (*citta, niyāma*), and of nature (*dhamma, niyāma*). See the 5 natural orders, SD 5.6 (2). On *dhamma, niyāma*, see SD 26.8 (2).

¹⁸⁷ From here to the end of §18.4 as at **Tathāgata Acchariya S** (A 4.127, 1.2-1.4), SD 36.15 (the 1st of the 4 marvels in the Buddha’s life), & **Acchariya, abbhūta S** (M 123, 7/3:120), SD 52.2; cf **Nidāna Kathā** (J 1:51).

¹⁸⁸ *Yadā, bhikkhave, bodhisatto tusitā kāyā cavitvā sato sampajāno mātu, kucchīm okkamati*. As in **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16), where it is given as the 3rd reason for a great earth tremor (D 16, 3.15/2:108), SD 9. *Cavitvā*, absolute of *cavati*, “falls from (a heaven),” said of the celestial being when he dies; n *cuti, cavana* (comy).

¹⁸⁹ “This,” ie, the current generation despite a different time and cultural background.

there appears a great boundless radiance surpassing even the divine glory of the gods.¹⁹¹

1.18.2 Even in the abysmal dark, the blinding darkness of the space amongst the worlds,¹⁹² where even the lights of the moon and the sun, so mighty as they are, cannot penetrate,¹⁹³

a great boundless radiance appears, surpassing even the divine glory of the gods. [§1.32.2]

1.18.3 And those beings that have arisen there, too, on account of that light, perceive one another, saying:

‘It appears, sirs, that there are other beings, too, that have arisen here!’

1.18.4 And this 10,000-world system quakes, trembles, shudders. And a great boundless radiance fills the world, surpassing even the divine splendour of the gods.¹⁹⁴

This is the nature of things here.

(3) THE WOMB PROTECTION

1.19 It is the nature of things, bhikshus, that when the Bodhisattva is descending into his mother’s womb,¹⁹⁵ **4 young devas** [devaputras] undertake to protect the 4 quarters, thinking, ‘Let not any human or non-human harm the Bodhisattva or the Bodhisattva’s mother!’ This is the nature of things here.

(4) THE MOTHER’S VIRTUE

1.20 It is the nature of things, bhikshus, that when the Bodhisattva is descending into his mother’s womb, the Bodhisattva’s mother is by nature morally virtuous. She is one who¹⁹⁶ abstains from taking life, abstains from taking the not-given, abstains from sexual [D 2:13] misconduct, abstains from lying, abstains from strong drinks, distilled drinks, and intoxicants that cause heedlessness. This the nature of things here.

(5) THE MOTHER’S CHASTITY

1.21 It is the nature of things, bhikshus, that when the Bodhisattva is descending into his mother’s womb, **no thought connected with a cord of sensual pleasure arises in the Bodhisattva’s mother towards men**, nor would the Bodhisattva’s mother commit any transgression, with a lustful mind, towards any man. This is the nature of things here.

¹⁹⁰ *Deva*, here in the sense of “devas by convention” (*sammati, deva*), ie kings. The other 2 types of *deva* are “gods by rebirth” (*upapatti, deva*) and “gods by purification” (*visuddhi, deva*), ie the Buddhas, Pratyeka Buddhas and arhats (Nc 307 KhpA 123).

¹⁹¹ *Appamāṇo uḷāro obhāso pātubhavati atikkammeva devānaṃ devānubhāvaṃ.*

¹⁹² Comy ad M 123: Amongst every 3 world-systems, there is a space measuring 8,000 yojanas (56,000 mi = 90,123 km). It is like the space amongst three cart-wheels or almsbowls touching one another (MA 4:177). The beings are reborn in this great interworld hell (*lok’antarika mahā, niraya*) on account of having done some very serious offences against their parents or righteous recluses and brahmins, or because of some habitual evil deed, such as destroying life, etc. The hell-beings there are like huge 3-*gāvuta* (5.25 mi = 8.45 km) high long-clawed bats clinging onto trees (MA 4:178).

¹⁹³ *Yāpi tā lok’antikā aghā asaṃvutā andha, kārā andha, kāra, timisā yattha’p’imesaṃ candima, sūriyānaṃ evaṃ mah’iddhikānaṃ evaṃ mah’ānubhāvānaṃ ābhā nānubhonti.*

¹⁹⁴ As at §1.32.5.

¹⁹⁵ Although the verb “descending” (*okkanto*) is present continuous, it implies not only conception, but also the gestation of the Bodhisattva, as is obvious from the contexts of the subsequent sections.

¹⁹⁶ This 5-precept formula is stock: see **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14 ad loc n), SD 49.8a.

(6) THE MOTHER'S JOY

1.22 It is the nature of things, bhikshus, that when the Bodhisattva is descending into his mother's womb, the Bodhisattva's mother enjoys **the 5 cords of sensual pleasures**, attended by them, fully endowed and engrossed with them.¹⁹⁷

This is the nature of things here.

(7) THE MOTHER'S HEALTH

1.23 It is the nature of things, bhikshus, that when the Bodhisattva is descending into his mother's womb, that **no illness whatsoever arises in the Bodhisattva's mother**. The Bodhisattva's mother is comfortable and physically at ease.

And the Bodhisattva's mother sees the Bodhisattva, fully endowed with limbs and parts, free from any defect of faculty, within her womb.¹⁹⁸

1.23.2 Bhikshus, just as if there were **a beautiful beryl¹⁹⁹ gem** of the purest water—
eight faceted, well polished, clear, limpid, consummate in all its aspects,
through which runs a blue, or yellow, or red, or white thread, or brown thread²⁰⁰—
and a man with good eyesight, taking it in his hand, were to reflect on it, thus:

'This is *a beautiful beryl gem of the purest water—eight faceted, well polished, clear, limpid, consummate in all its aspects, through which runs a blue, or yellow, or red, or white, or brown thread,*²⁰¹

1.23.3 even so, bhikshus, *when the Bodhisattva is descending into his mother's womb, that no illness whatsoever arises in the Bodhisattva's mother. The Bodhisattva's mother is comfortable and physically at ease.*

¹⁹⁷ This means that she is overwhelmed with joy and rapture at her marital state. This explains why she has no sensual interest in others, as noted in §1.21(5). Cf §2.4.3, where the same is described of prince Vipassī.

¹⁹⁸ *Sukhinī bodhisatta, mātā hoti akilanta, kāyā, bodhisattañ ca bodhisatta, mātā tiro, kucchi, gatam passati sabb'-aṅga, paccaṅgim ahīn'indriyaṃ* [Be Se so; Ce Ee *abhinindriyaṃ*; Ke *abhīnindriyaṃ*]. See M 2:85, 3:121. See DA 2:436, cf 1:222. Note here that it is the Bodhisattva's mother, not everyone, who is able to see the baby. This is an allusion to a mother's visualization of her child as she bears him.

¹⁹⁹ *Veluriya*: from a metathesis of *veruliya* comes Greek *beryllos*, "beryl," whence German *Brille*, "spectacles" (originally, of beryl) (Walshe).

²⁰⁰ "Through which runs ... etc," *tatra suttam āvutaṃ nīlaṃ vā pītaṃ vā lohitaṃ vā odātaṃ vā paṇḍu, suttam vā*. Rhys Davids tr *pīta* here as "orange-coloured," and *paṇḍu* as "yellow" (D:RD 1:87), while Bodhi has them as "yellow" and "brown" respectively (1989:44). Cf "clearly visible as if with a yellow thread strung through a jewel" (*vippasanne maṇi, ratne āvuta, paṇḍu, suttam viya*, J 1:51). *Paṇḍu, sutta* is found in **Vidhura Paṇḍita J** (J 545/6:305), where E B Cowell & W H D Rouse tr it as "white thread" (J:C&R 6:147). Both *pīta* and *paṇḍu* sometimes refer to "yellow." SED def *pāṇḍu* as "yellowish white, white, pale." Comys offer no explanation, except that the gem "is like the physical body, and the thread running through it, is like insight knowledge (*vipassanā, ñāṇa*)" (DA 1:211). DANṬ (New Subcomy) corrects "insight knowledge" to "insight consciousness" (*vipassanā, viññāṇa*, DANṬ:VRI 2:126). **Jothiko**: "Generally, 'knowledge and vision' is the ability, the state of clarity, enabling one to see even hidden things clearly. So, the image of a transparent gem. It is both 'higher than Jhāna', if the absorptions are taken as 'pleasant abiding in the here and now.' And 'less than the absorptions' if they are used as a way of reaching full enlightenment. So, obviously, it is not the *sammā ñāṇa*—knowledge of liberation. The colors at old [sic] were often associated with natural phenomena. *Paṇḍu* is earthen colors, the word used even today to denote the dyeing of robes: various natural hues of brown, mostly. Just as *lohita* is both 'blood' and the color of 'red,' *pitta* [*pīta*] is 'bile' and its shades, mostly 'light green,' off yellow" (Jothiko's email, 13 Nov 2006). It is possible that the 6 colours represent the 6 sense-consciousnesses. The first 4 colours are those of the colour *kaṣiṇa* meditations: see **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16,3.29-32/2:110 f), SD 9. See **Viññāṇa**, SD 17.8a (4.1).

²⁰¹ Close parallel in **Mahā'padāna S** (D 14,1.21/2:13), SD 49.8, & **Acchariya, abbhūta S** (M 123,12/3:121), SD 52.2.

*And the Bodhisattva's mother sees the Bodhisattva, fully endowed with limbs and parts, free from any defect of faculty, within her womb.*²⁰²

This is the nature of things here.

(8) THE MOTHER'S DEATH [4.6]

1.24 It is the nature of things, bhikshus, that 7 days after the Bodhisattva is born, the Bodhisattva's mother dies, and is reborn amongst the Tusita host.

This is the nature of things here.

(9) THE GESTATION PERIOD

1.25 It is the nature of things, bhikshus, that, while in the case of other women who give birth after bearing the child for 9 or 10 months,²⁰³ the Bodhisattva's mother does not give birth until she has borne the child for exactly **10 months**.

This is the nature of things here.

(D 14,1.17-1.25), SD 49.8a

2.4 MĀYĀ'S DREAM

2.4.1 Āsālha

2.4.1.1 Having made the 5 investigations [2.2], the Bodhisattva in Tusita went to the Nandana, vana, the Grove of Delight, and while wandering there, fell away from Tusita and descends for conception in Māyā's womb. He was aware of his death but unaware of his death-consciousness (dying thought, *cuti-citta*). The Commentators differ as to whether he was aware of his conception. However, all agree that **the great conception** occurred on the full-moon day of Āsālha (June-July),²⁰⁴ with the moon in Uttar'āsālha.²⁰⁵

It is said that Māyā had had no relations with her husband. When the Bodhisattva was conceived, she had no sexual desire. In fact, for the preceding 7 days, she had been keeping the uposatha precepts, one of which being that of celibacy [3.2.1.5(2)]. We are not told that this was a "virgin birth" or parthenogenesis—but merely that the Bodhisattva was not sexually conceived. In other words, she conceived the Bodhisattva in a non-sexual manner or supernatural means—an "immaculate conception" in the true non-theistic sense of the term. This is the first suggestion in the Buddha narrative of a transcendence of a sex-based species to a spiritual evolution towards self-awakening.

²⁰² This parable recurs in a similar context in **Acchariya-abbhūta S** (M 123,12/3:121), SD 52.2, but in **Mahā Sakul'udāyi S** (M 77), it is applied to the true nature of the body and mind, and their interdependence (M 77,29/2:17), SD 6.18.

²⁰³ Comy, reflecting the midwife tradition of the day, notes that those who gestate for 7, 11 or 12 months live. Those born after only 7 (lunar) months cannot endure heat or cold; but those born in the 8th month do not live (no reason is given); but the others live. (DA 2:437). This seemed to refer to premature or to late-term babies. These are culture-bound comments which, as a rule, do apply today where medical care is proper or advanced. The idea is that the Bodhisattva was a full-term child.

²⁰⁴ On the Indian months, see SD 1.2 n & http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindu_calendar.

²⁰⁵ Uttar'āsālha (Skt *uttar'āśāḍha*) is the 21st (*nakkhatta*; Skt *nakṣatra*) among the 27 constellations in the Indian zodiac. It is situated on the lower part of the (Lyra) - α Lyr - (Vega), spanning from 26°40" in Sagittarius to 10°00" in Capricorn in the sidereal Vedic zodiac.

This account is clearly a myth to highlight the advent of the Buddha, who will be *with* the world, but is not *of* the world. Again, this has neither any prophetic nor docetic significance²⁰⁶ at all, but is simply highlighting the fact that celibacy will play a significance in the attaining of the highest, nirvana. While *sexuality* is the basis of human evolution as a species and tribe (a crowd), **the celibate holy life** (*brahma-cariya*) represents the evolution of the individual—an individuation process—beyond the species to a universal spirituality and freedom of awakening.

2.4.1.2 The Jātaka Nidāna begins the story of the Bodhisattva’s conception in Kapila, vatthu (J 1:49-52). It was the week of the Āsāḷha festivities, leading up to its full-moon day. Māyā rose at dawn on the 7th day, and having washed herself in scented water, gave away alms worth 400,000 pieces. Then, having taken some choice food, she kept the uposatha precepts²⁰⁷ and retired to the royal bed-chamber. As she lay on her couch, she fell asleep and had an auspicious dream. This famous dream is here reproduced in full from the account in the Jātaka Nidāna.²⁰⁸

“(1) She felt as though the 4 great kings (the guardian deva-lords of the 4 quarters) lifted up her bed and, taking her up to the Himalayas, placed her under a great sal tree 7 yojanas²⁰⁹ high, on Mano, silā, - tala [a red laterite plateau],²¹⁰ 60 yojanas wide, and stood at one side. [2.4.1.3]

(2) Then, their consorts came and, taking queen Māyā to the Anottatā Lake, bathed her to rid her of her human taints, and dressed her in heavenly raiments [8.1.1], anointed her with divine perfumes, and decked her with celestial flowers. Not far away, there was a silver mountain and on it a golden abode. In the abode, they prepared a heavenly couch with its head towards the east, and made her lie on it. [2.4.1.4]

(3) Then, the Bodhisattva, in the form of a lordly albino elephant, who was wandering about on the golden mountain nearby, came down and went up the silver mountain. Coming from the north, carrying a white lotus in his silver-rope-like trunk, he trumpeted. [2.4.1.5]

(4) Then, entering the golden abode, he circumambulated her thrice, and appeared as though, after making an opening on her right, entered her womb. Thus did he take conception²¹¹ under the descendent asterism of Āsāḷha.” [2.4.1.6] (J 1:50,11-24)²¹²

²⁰⁶ Meaning that the Buddha is neither a prophet of some “Dharma essence” nor an incarnation (“phantom” appearance) of some cosmic Buddha. Either of these suggests some kind of “eternalist” view (*sassata, diṭṭhi*), which is rejected by the Buddha: see SD 1.1 (3.2.2(3)).

²⁰⁷ These are the 8 precepts: abstaining from (1) killing, (2) stealing, (3) incelibacy (all kinds of sex), (4) lying, (5) any kind of intoxicants or addictives, (6) meals at the wrong times (between noon and dawn), (7) any kind of entertainment or adornment and beautifying, and (8) any kind of high or luxurious beds. See (**Tad-ah**)uposatha S (A 3.-70,9-16), SD 4.18; **Vitthat’uposatha S** (A 8.42), SD 89.11; **Nav’aṅ’uposatha S** (A 9.18), SD 59.4.

²⁰⁸ For **Lalita, Vistara** (Mahāyāna) version of the elephant dream, see Foucher 1963:22-26.

²⁰⁹ On the lesser *yojana* for height, see (2.2.1.4(2)). On the greater *yojana* for distance, see SD 4.17 (1.2.2); SD 47.8 (2.4.4.1).

²¹⁰ The prec 2 phrases: *Saṭṭhi, yojanike mano, silā, tale satta, yojanikāssu mahā, sāla, rukkhassa heṭṭha ṭhāpetvā. Mano, silā, tala* is either a place-name (eg SnA 1:223) or some kind of flat high ground where those who bathe in the lake would dry and dress themselves (J 2:65): see (2.2.2.3(1)). Alt tr: “... placed under a great sal tree 7 yojanas high, on a laterite platform, 60 yojanas wide.” In this case, it is likely that both measurements are the “lesser yojana”: see (2.2.1.4(2)).

²¹¹ “(Thus) did he take conception,” *paṭisandhim gaṇhi*. This interesting phrase suggests the Commentary takes life as beginning with conception itself. However, we cannot assume this account applies to humans and other beings, or only to the Bodhisattva.

²¹² On the conception, see Nakamura 2000:54-58.

2.4.1.3 Let us have a quick look at **the dream symbols** [2.4.1.2] for a better understanding of the story and its import regarding the Dharma. The comments here are numbered in accordance to the Jātaka Nidāna sections on Māyā’s dream:

(1) Properly observing the uposatha puja (including giving alms), Māyā must have surely felt blissfully peaceful. Such a state of mind brought the auspicious dream. **The 4 great kings** (*cātu mahā,rāja*) [2.2.1.7], the “world protectors” of the 4 quarters,²¹³ each taking one of the legs of the bed with her slumbering in it, flew through the air up to the fabulous Anotattā lake.

The 4 great kings, guardians of the 4 quarters, were just the right devas to perform this task since they were 4 in number and also the lowest of the sense-world gods. It was clearly an honour for them to do this themselves, since they could have easily ordered their underlings to perform such a seemingly menial task. The presence of the gods portended greater things to come.

The 4 queens of the guardian kings then washed Māyā in the Anotattā lake (Skt *anvatapta*, “heat-free”). This is probably one of the great inland lakes: either the Mana,sarovara (“the mind-lake”)²¹⁴ or the Issyk-kul (Krygyz, “the warm lake”).²¹⁵ This sacred lake represents *the cooling of suffering*, which clearly points to the Bodhisattva’s quest in due course.²¹⁶ Māyā, freshly dressed in divine raiments, was brought back to her bed. Then, she saw in the distance a flying 6-tusked albino elephant.

There were at least 2 important symbols here. The first was **the sal tree**—we would have expected the pipal or bodhi tree,²¹⁷ under which the Buddha awakens. However, as this episode was a precursor to the nativity, it was appropriate that it was the sal tree that was featured here: it was the tree under which Māyā would deliver the infant Bodhisattva in Lumbinī.²¹⁸

The 2nd important symbol was **the *mano.silā,tala***,²¹⁹ which can refer either to “a plateau” or “a rock platform.”²²⁰ In symbolic terms, it was more likely that, at least here, it referred to some kind of “rock platform” or flat raised ground, that is, some kind of compound around the sal tree. This would then be an allusion to the “awakening compound” (*bodhi,maṇḍa*)²²¹—the sacred area immediately under the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha awakens.

²¹³ The 4 junior gods (*deva,putta*) are the lowest ranking devas: (1) **Dhata,raṭṭha** protects the east, said to be midslope of Mt Sumeru, leading to the continent of Videha; (2) **Virūlhaka**, in the south, guards the entrance into Jambu,dīpa; (3) **Virūpakkha**, in the west, guards the portal to Godānīya; and (4) **Vessa,vaṇa**, in the north, guards the entrance to Uttara,kuru. See Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism, sv lokapāla & DPPN: cātummahārājika. Cf the 4 “regent stars” of Zoroastrianism: J H Moulton, *Early Zoroastrianism*, Philo Press, 1913:22-27, 242, DJVU 2010.

²¹⁴ Located near the foot of Mt Kailash in Tibet, and is the highest lake in the world:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake_Manasarovar.

²¹⁵ It is an endorheic (self-contained without any outlet) lake in the northern Tian Shan in eastern Kyrgyzstan (far north of India in Central Asia) and the world’s 2nd largest lake after Titicaca on the border of Bolivia and Peru, in South America.

²¹⁶ See eg **Ariya,pariyesanā S** (M 26,5-14), SD 1.11.

²¹⁷ See **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14,3.45(5)), SD 49.8a.

²¹⁸ It is interesting that the Buddha is born under a sal tree, and passes away under a pair of them: see **Mahā,-parinibbāna S** (D 16,5.1), SD 9.

²¹⁹ Also at J 2:92 f, 219, 5:423. Cf a similar ref at SA 1:160, 322; DhA 4:113; J 5:392, 416; UA 280; VvA 217; SnA 1:77, 104; ApA 181. A number of these refs are to a level ground of laterite a favourite haunts of lions. For other refs, do a wildcard search on CSCD: manosilātāl*.

²²⁰ The usual tr of *mano.silā* is “red arsenic” or realgar which is poisonous and usu exists in combination with sulphur and metals, or as pure elemental crystals. It is more likely that *mano,silā* is **laterite**, that is, a relatively common soil and rock type in southern and SE Asia, and which is rich in iron and aluminium, and is commonly considered to have formed in hot and wet tropical areas. Nearly all laterites are rusty-red because of high iron oxide content.

²²¹ B 2.65, 20.17, 25.20, but very common in comys.

2.4.1.4 (2) This section of the Jātaka Nidāna account of Māyā’s dreams depicts her being washed with the waters of Anotattā, cleansed of human taints and dressed up as a deity. She was then led to a golden abode on a silver mountain. Therein, she lay down on a heavenly couch²²² with her head towards the east (and her feet facing the west).

The ritual washing of Māyā, I think, portended 2 important events. The first was that she would no more be of the earth, but be reborn in heaven—in Tusita, to be exact. It’s as if mother and son had exchanged places. Māyā’s son, the Bodhisattva Siddhattha, came down to earth, and she went up to Tusita. Secondly, Māyā’s ritual washing also portended Siddhattha’s leaving behind his human state, as his humanity purified itself into divinity, and further refined itself into buddhahood and nirvana.

Gold and silver were highly valued on earth, but in Tusita, there was no need of them, as the devas had the power to produce them any time in any amount. They had no desire for earthly things as they were naturally happy—unless reminded of impermanence, which terrified even devas—as stated in **the (Anicca) Sīha Sutta** (S 22.78).²²³

Māyā slept with her head pointing east—the direction of the rising sun—but her feet pointed to the west, the direction of the setting sun and of death. Again, we get a hint of her impending death since the coffins and remains of the dead are traditionally carried with the feet forward (as if they are walking their final journey).

We would have expected Māyā to sleep with her head pointing **north** (that is, oriented north-south), as the Buddha does—some say, in keeping in harmony with the flow of geomagnetic forces.²²⁴ The north is *uttara*, the “noble or superior” quarter—those of our true and good friends, like the Buddha, the highest of the noble ones, the saints of the noble path.²²⁵ He sleeps mindfully on his right, lion-like, the posture of the meditator.²²⁶ As he sleeps, then, he faces the west—the direction of death. We die to each day with the set sun, but we are reborn with the dawn sun. As we sleep buddha-like, we are reminded we can rise beyond both sleeping and waking, death and life—meantime, we always enjoy good sleep.²²⁷

2.4.1.5 (3) Māyā’s famous dream of the white elephant is significant both in mythical and psychological ways. First, **the mythical significance** of her dream. The “6-tusked” (*cha-d,danta*) white elephant was one of the 7 “jewels” (*ratana*) or royal emblems of the world monarch (*cakka,vatti*).²²⁸ It was (and is), in fact, a universal symbol of sovereignty amongst the Indian kings and the kings of south and south-east Asia.

Of the 10 breeds of elephants mentioned in the Buddhist texts,²²⁹ the Chad,danta was listed last, that is, as the best of them.²³⁰ The world monarch’s elephant jewel was of white hue (an albino) and was able to fly through the air.²³¹ The Buddha possesses the strength of 10 Chaddanta elephants, each of which has the strength of thousand million men! (BA 42). [We can easily imagine how this synecdoche²³² refers

²²² On the Buddha’s heavenly couch or “divine great high couch” (*dibba uccā,sayana mahā,sayana*) as an allusion to mastery of dhyana, see **Venāga,pura S** (S 3.68,5), SD 21.1.

²²³ S 22.78,7-8/3:85 (SD 42/10).

²²⁴ See **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16.5.1), SD 9.

²²⁵ On the north (uttara) as being “noble,” see (D 31,31), SD 4.1 (1.2.2-1.2.3).

²²⁶ On the 4 postures of sleeping, see **Seyya S** (A 4.244), SD 76.6.

²²⁷ See **Hatthaka Ājavaka S** (A 3.34), SD 4.8.

²²⁸ On the world-monarch’s 7 jewels, see **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14,1.33.5), SD 49.8a.

²²⁹ DA 573; MA 2:25 f; SA 2:43; AA 5:10; UA 403; NmA 3:55; VbhA 397; PmA 625.

²³⁰ KhpA says that the elephant jewel of the world monarch is chosen from either the Chaddanta breed or the Uposatha breed—the youngest from the former, the eldest from the latter (KhpA 172).

²³¹ **Mahā Sudassana S** (D 17,1.2) + SD 36.12 (3.2); **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129,36), SD 2.22; J 5:37; Vism 650.

²³² A synecdoche is figurative shorthand, where a part is named but the whole is understood, eg “the robe” for monks; or the whole is named but a part is named but a part if understood, eg “Magadha conquered Aṅga.”

to the full might of an army of hundreds of thousands of warriors. I suspect that the Indian notion of *koṭi* or “million” is close to how we think of a “thousand” today.]

2.4.1.6 (4) Māyā, dressed in heavenly raiments, dreamed of **the 6-tusked albino entering her womb by the right side**. We can take this as representing the moment of the Bodhisattva’s conception, that is, the actual “descent” (*okkanta*) into his earthly mother’s womb. This significant event marks the start of the Bodhisattva’s final journey: his final and earthly incarnation and the beginning of the miraculous life of Gotama Buddha.

Why did the Bodhisattva assume the form of an elephant and not, say, a deva? **The elephant**, we must assume is a convenient symbol of sentience and intelligence, which runs through all life capable of evolving to the highest level, that of Buddhahood, the full awakening that frees us from the cycle of evolution. In short, *the elephant* symbolizes that all sentient life can, in due course, attain awakening and liberation.

2.4.1.7 Traditionally, the 6 tusks—a set of 3 magnificently elongated incisors—meant that it was (along with the Uposatha breed, DhA 3:248) one of the *cha-d,danta* (Skt *ṣad,danta*), the best breed or family (*kula*) of elephants.²³³ The albino elephant, it is well-known, represents the Bodhisattva. On a simple level, we can understand that the two triads of tusks represented the 3 jewels (the Buddha, Dharma and sangha) and the 3 trainings (in moral virtue, mental concentration and wisdom). It was a Dharma-elephant.²³⁴

The dream of the 6-tusked white elephant had some **psychological significance**. However, it was unlikely that psychologists of our time would find any sexual connotations of the elephant. It’s hard to imagine such a noble elephant to be a sex symbol, although there might be some hint of sexuality in the elephant’s entering Māyā on the right side [2.4.1.8]. But then, we must remember that the underpinning themes of the Bodhisattva’s story here was that of absolute purity and power—after all, he would become the fully self-awakened one (*sammā,sambuddha*).

2.4.1.8 We have already noted that Māyā, in her dream, was depicted as sleeping **with her head pointing east** [2.4.1.4]. However, we were not told whether she was sleeping on her right or her left. Traditionally—if we follow early Buddhist tradition, as stated in **the Seyya Sutta** (A 4.244),²³⁵ she should be sleeping on her right side, “lion-like” (*sīh’āsana*, the lion posture); sleeping on the left reflected a worldly person (*kāma,bhogī*).²³⁶

The ancient sculptures depict Māyā sleeping in different ways during the dream (which is actually natural). At Bharhut (c2nd-1st century BE), Sanchi (3rd century BCE; [stupa 1 eastern gateway](#)), Gandhara ([100-300](#), phyllite relief) and Borobudur (9th century)—Māyā is depicted lying lion-like, on her right side.²³⁷ However, the reliefs of Māyā’s dream at Amaravati (3rd century BCE), Nagarjunakonda (225-235

²³³ The Bodhisattva was once born as the king of the Cha-d,danta elephants: **Cha-d,danta J** (J 514/5:36-57). S Speyer gives an allegorical explanation of the story in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft* (ZDMG) 75,2:305 ff. For a comparative study of 5 different versions of the story (Pali, 2 Chin and Skt), see Feer, *Journal Asiatique* 5 1895. A similar fine breed of elephant is the *uposatha* (D 2:174,14 = M 3:173,31).

²³⁴ On the cover and spine of each of the 45 volumes of the royal Syām,raṭṭha edition of the Siamese Tipiṭaka (Be 2502/1959 CE) is embossed with a figure of an elephant, signifying both Siam (the old name for Thailand) and the Dharma.

²³⁵ A 4.244 (SD 76.6).

²³⁶ The Buddha is depicted as resting on his right in **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,5.1.3), SD 9.

²³⁷ For the Bhārhut stupa relief of Māyā’s dream, see Foucher 1963 opp p26;

CE) and [Gandhara](#) (2nd century) depict her as lying on her left.²³⁸ Interestingly, a Bharhut stupa medallion depicts her as sleeping supine (on her back) with the elephant on her left (we must imagine the elephant is circling her)!

We may conjecture that Māyā should be sleeping on her left, since the elephant entered on her right side. However, in a dream, it did not really matter: Māyā *dreamed* that the elephant entered on her right. It was not a physical event; hence, it did not matter on which side she slept during the dream.

2.4.1.9 The 6 tusks of the albino elephant are best interpreted as having a **moral psychological, even a spiritual, significance**. Since these tusks belonged to the Bodhisattva—who is to become the Buddha—we can take them as symbols for the **6 superknowledges** (*cha-l-abhiññā*): psychic powers, the divine ear (clairaudience), mind-reading, retrocognition, the divine eye (clairvoyance), and the knowledge of the destruction of mental influxes.²³⁹ These are the hallmarks of one fully awakened, the arhat, of whom the Buddha is the first.²⁴⁰

More broadly, we could relate the albino's 6 tusks as alluding to **the 6 perfections** (**cha pāramitā*; Skt *śad paramita*), that is, those of giving (*dāna pāramitā*), of moral virtue (*sīla pāramitā*), of renunciation (*nekkhamma pāramitā*), of effort (*virīya pāramitā*) and of wisdom (*paññā pāramitā*). The Bodhisattva had perfected these qualities, readying him for Buddhahood.

This set of 6 perfections is an early Mahāyāna teaching, not found in the early Buddhist texts (EBT). A list of **10 perfections** (*dasa pāramī*) is found in later strata of the EBTs—the Jātaka, the Buddha,vaṃsa, the Apadāna and the Cariyā,piṭaka²⁴¹—but this is probably a later set, influenced by both the decimal system and early Mahāyāna.²⁴² Both sets of perfections have, essentially, arisen from a more advanced and refined practice of the 4 divine abodes (*brahma,vihāra*).²⁴³

2.5 PORTENTS

2.5.1 The 32 portents

2.5.1.1 In Buddhist mythology, **portents** or “foresigns” (*pubba,nimitta*) are common. **The Jātaka Nidāna**, before presenting the 32 portents (J 1:51,2), states that “at the very moment of the Bodhisattva's being conceived in his mother's womb, the entire 10,000 world-systems quaked, trembled and

²³⁸ J Ferguson 1868:pl lxxiv; J Burgess 1886:pl xxxii; Amaravati <https://www.britannica.com/art/Amaravati-sculpture>.

²³⁹ The 6 superknowledges (*cha-l-abhiññā*) are respectively: (1) *iddhi,vidhā*, (2) *dibba,sota*, (3) *ceto,pariya,ñāṇa*, (4) *pubbe,nivāsānussati*, (5) *dibba,cakkhu* and (6) *āsava-k,khaya,ñāṇa*. The last refers to the total abandonment of the 3 influxes, those of sensual lust (*kām'āsava*), of existence (*bhav'āsava*) and of ignorance (*avijjāsava*): see SD 30.3 (1.3.2). A later, better known, list adds a 4th influx, “the influx of views” (*diṭṭh'āsava*), as (3) etc: (**Catukka**) **Yoga S** (A 4.10/2:10), SD 105.1.

²⁴⁰ On the Buddha as the 1st arhat, see **Sambuddha S** (S 22.58), SD 49.10.

²⁴¹ B 1.75 f/6, 11.182/16; CA 266-277; ApA 30; J 1:27*. Otherwise, *pāramī*, even in comys refers simply to those qualities or virtues that make one a true *disciple* (*sāvaka*), ie, the attaining of the path of awakening, as in **Nidhi,kaṇḍa S** (Khp 8.15/7, qu at AA 1:56, J 2:414; KhpA 229); (PmA 3:653).

²⁴² The 10 perfections (*dasa pāramī*) are those of: (1) giving (*dāna pāramī*), (2) moral virtue (*sīla pāramī*), (3) renunciation (*nekkhamma pāramī*), (4) wisdom (*paññā pāramī*), (5) effort (*virīya pāramī*), (6) forbearance (*khanti pāramī*), (7) truth (*sacca pāramī*), (8) determination (*adhiṭṭhāna pāramī*), (9) lovingkindness (*mettā pāramī*) and (10) equanimity (*upekkhā pāramī*): see B 1.75 f/6 (qu at DAṬ 2:16). On Mahāyāna influence on the later canonical Pali texts, see N Dutt, *Buddhist Sects in India*, Delhi, 1978:219, 251. See Ency Bsm 7:312-314: Pāramitā.

²⁴³ Vism 9.124/325.

shook with one accord.²⁴⁴ This is a cosmic phenomenon that highlights the first contact of the future Buddha with the human world; hence, the fanfare, so to speak. [2.5.1.4]

We do not see such a dramatic cosmic quake in the suttas. One key reason for this is that the sutta teachings, although available for all “to come and see” (*ehi,passika*),²⁴⁵ only those who are mentally ready are likely to see the teaching and *understand* true reality. Miraculous stories, even miracles, are not sufficient to awaken an ignorant being—only wisdom does. Miracles are more likely to benefit those who perform them or claim to perform them.²⁴⁶ The greatest miracle is when we are able to learn good, free our mind, and then to teach the Dharma.²⁴⁷

However, we do have accounts of earthquakes (*bhūmi,cāla*) occurring, say, to highlight key events in the Buddha’s life. **The Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16) records the Buddha as giving 8 reasons for the occurrences of earthquakes, thus:

- (1) natural causes;
- (2) the effect of psychic power;
- (3) the descent of the Bodhisattva from Tusita;
- (4) the Bodhisattva’s birth on earth;
- (5) the Buddha’s supreme awakening;
- (6) the first turning of the Dharma-wheel;
- (7) the Buddha relinquishing his life-formation; and
- (8) the final passing-away of the Buddha.

D 16,3.13-3.20 (SD 9)²⁴⁸

Again, we should remember that in the suttas, such earthquakes only affect the earth—where it is best to learn the Dharma—and not throughout the cosmos, but the other kind of **quake** occurs almost exclusively to highlight key events in mythical accounts of the Bodhisattva and the Buddha.

2.5.1.2 The best known of these **portents** are the 4 sights [7] seen by the Bodhisattva that prompts him to renounce the world. The most elaborate of these portents are those presaging the Bodhisattva’s conception—the 32 portents [2.5.1.5]. Both these sets of portents are commentarial: they are not found in the suttas.

However, there is a well-known portent that recurs numerous times in the suttas, that is, the manifestation of **universal radiance** attending some key events of the life of the Bodhisattva and the Buddha. This light symbolism is usually found along with other miraculous manifestations in the life of the Bodhisattva and the Buddha.

2.5.1.3 These miraculous events of **the Mahā’padāna Sutta** (D 14) [2.3.1.3]—relating to Vipassī Buddha—and **the Acchariya,abbhūta Sutta** (M 123)—relating to Gotama Buddha—are listed in this comparative table.²⁴⁹ The occurrences of some kind of great radiance are designated with an asterisk (*).

²⁴⁴ *Eka-p,pahāren’eva sakala,dasa,sahassī loka,dhātu saṅkampi sampakampi sampavedhi.*

²⁴⁵ On *ehi,passika*, see SD 15.9 (2.4).

²⁴⁶ On problems with miracles, see SD 1.7 (3); SD 27.5a.

²⁴⁷ This is called “the miracle of instruction (learning)” (*anusāsani pāṭihāriya*): see **Kevaladdha S** (D 11,8+66 etc), SD 1.7. See also **(Pāṭihāriya) Saṅgarava S** (A 3.60/1:175), SD 16.10.

²⁴⁸ This passage recurs at *Bhūmi,cāla S* (A 8.70/4:308-313).

²⁴⁹ This Table also appears in SD 36.15 (1.1.2).

D 14	M 123	D 14 (SD 49.8) (<i>dhammatā</i>)	M 123 (SD 52.2) (<i>acchariya, abbhūta</i>)
(1)	The Bodhisattva appears in Tusita	—	§3 3:119 f
(2)	The Bodhisattva remains in Tusita	—	§4 3:120
(3)	The Bodhisattva's whole lifespan in Tusita	—	§5 3:120
(1)	(4) The Bodhisattva's descent into the womb	§1.17 2:12	§6 3:120
(2)	(5) The Bodhisattva's descent and conception: lights ²⁵⁰	§1.18* 2:12	§7* 3:120
(3)	(6) Guarding the womb by 4 devas	§1.19 2:12	§8 3:120
(4)	(7) Māyā is morally virtuous while pregnant	§1.20 2:12	§9 3:121
(5)	(8) Māyā has no sensual thoughts while pregnant	§1.21 2:13	§10 3:121
(6)	(9) Māyā enjoys the 5 cords of sense-pleasures	§1.22 2:13	§11 3:121
(7)	(10) The conception: no affliction whatsoever in Māyā	§1.23 2:13	§12 3:122
(8)	(11) Mahā Māyā's death; reborn in Tusita	§1.24 2:14	§13 3:122
(9)	(12) The gestation takes exactly 10 lunar months	§1.25 2:14	§14 3:122
(10)	(13) The Bodhisattva is born standing	§1.26 2:14	§15 3:122
(11)	(14) The devas receive the emerging Bodhisattva	§1.27 2:14	§16 3:122
(12)	(15) 4 young devas present the Bodhisattva to Māyā	§1.28 2:14	§17 3:122
(13)	(16) The Bodhisattva emerges spotless	§1.29 2:14	§18 3:122 f
(14)	(17) Heavenly jets of cool water and warm water	§1.30 2:15	§19 3:123
(15)	(18) The 7 steps: the 1 st lion-roar by the Bodhisattva	§1.31 2:15	§20 3:123
(16)	(19) The Bodhisattva's birth: universal radiance ²⁵¹	§1.32* 2:15	§21* 3:123
(17)	(20) The prognostication: the 32 marks	§1.33 2:16	—

From this table, we can see that there are only 2 occurrences of universal radiance: (1) the Bodhisattva's descent from Tusita into Māyā's womb [2.3], and (2) the Bodhisattva's birth [3.2].²⁵² In **the (Tathāgata) Acchariya Sutta** (A 4.127), a total of 4 occasions of universal radiance are the 2 already mentioned, along with the great awakening and the first discourse,²⁵³ thus:

- | | |
|--|--------------|
| (1) the Bodhisattva's descent and conception; | [10.1, 11.1] |
| (2) the Bodhisattva's birth; | [13] |
| (3) the Buddha's great awakening; and | [17] |
| (4) the Buddha's setting in motion the Dharma-wheel. | |

2.5.1.4 The most elaborate canonical account of the Bodhisattva's descent and conception is found in **the Mahā'padāna Sutta** (D 14). While the Mahā'padāna Sutta speaks of the various marvels attending the Bodhisattva's life [2.5.1.1] as being "the nature of things" (*dhammatā*), **the Acchariya Abbhūta Sutta** (M 123) calls them "marvellous wonders" (*acchariya, abbhūta*). We shall soon see the significance of "the nature of things" [2.7.4.3].²⁵⁴

2.5.1.5 The Jātaka Nidāna, in its account of the Bodhisattva's conception, is much more elaborate. When the Bodhisattva is conceived, it says, "the entire 10,000 world-systems quaked, trembled and shook with one accord." The following 32 portents (*dva-t, tim̐sa pubba, nimitta*) were manifested:

²⁵⁰ As in **(Tathāgata) Acchariyā S 1** (A 4.127,2/2:130 f), SD 36.15.

²⁵¹ As in **(Tathāgata) Acchariyā S** (A 4.127,1/2:131).

²⁵² For further details, see under the respective suttas: **D 14**/2:1-54 (SD 49.8); **M 123**/3:118-124 (SD 52.2).

²⁵³ A 4.127/2:130 f (SD 36.15).

²⁵⁴ D 14,1.17/2:12-15 (SD 49.8a).

- (1) A boundless radiance pervaded the whole physical universe.
- (2) The blind regained their sight as if to behold this wonder.
- (3) The deaf regained their hearing.
- (4) The dumb were able to speak.
- (5) The hunchback stood erect.
- (6) The crippled were able to walk on their feet.
- (7) Beings in bondage were free of their bondage.
- (8) The fires of hell were extinguished.
- (9) Hunger and thirst in the realm of the departed (the pretas) were allayed.
- (10) Fear amongst beasts vanished.
- (11) Disease in beings subsided.
- (12) All beings are friendly to one another.
- (13) Horses neighed gently.
- (14) Elephants trumpeted gently.
- (15) Musical instruments emitted their respective sounds.
- (16) Ornaments on humans sounded even without striking against one another.
- (17) All the quarters became calmly clear.
- (18) A cool gentle breeze wafted, refreshing everyone.
- (19) Rain fell out of season.
- (20) Water, welling up from the earth flowed around.
- (21) The birds rested from flying in the skies.
- (22) The rivers stayed their flow.
- (23) The great ocean waters tasted sweet.
- (24) All the earth's surface was covered with lotuses of 5 colours.
- (25) Flowers bloomed on land and in water; the tree trunks, branches and twigs burst with flowers.
- (26) Lotuses on stalks blossomed forth in clusters of sevens through cracks in the arid rocks.
- (27) Lotuses appeared floating in the sky.
- (28) Everywhere flowers rained down.
- (29) Devas played music that resounded in the air.
- (30) The whole 10,000 world-systems revolved as if closer together like a single garland.
- (31) They became like fragrant woven wreaths.
- (32) They looked resplendent like a mass of garlands, like flowers surrounded by incense and scent.

2.5.2 The portents in perspective

2.5.2.1 We see here a classic example of ancient Indian **hyperbole**, but with a significant purpose. These remarkable, even impossible, events would fill with wonder the minds of the ancient Indian masses or anyone who heard these accounts. The modern reader may dismiss these hyperbolic accounts as incredible fantasies. We must imagine that the ancient Indian audience were enthralled by these words, just as we today enjoy watching the amazingly imaginative Star Trek series (beginning 1966), the Star Wars movies (beginning 1977), the "Stargate" series (original movie 1994, followed by TV series), and the "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy (2001-2003).

2.5.2.2 If we are students of literature, or we appreciate literature, then, we will at once understand that such hyperbolic, yet jubilant, language, is an ancient device of dramatizing and highlighting a key or vital event in a culture or religion. In this case, the ancient Buddhist narrators are announcing the conception of the Bodhisattva. He has taken life in our world: this is the beginning of the humanization of spirituality and awakening.

2.5.2.3 Such amazingly great news must give the masses some good idea of what is to come or what we can do to be free of our difficulties and suffering. This is like the beautiful lights and hues of dawn, ushering a new day. Running through the 32 miraculous portents are the ideas of healing, happiness, beauty and freedom. These are the omens or harbingers of the Buddha's advent which will make all this possible. Hence, Vasubandhu, in his **Abhidharma,kośa**, suggests that Māyā's dream of a white elephant enter her side "was only an omen, because for a long time the Bodhisattva has been disengaged from animal rebirth." (Abdhk 3.13a-b)²⁵⁵

Namakura, however, remarks that Vasubandhu's comments represent a **demythologizing process** taking place over 1,500 years ago in India. "Then why was the myth of a white elephant created?" Nakamura asks, and explains:

The mounting rain clouds of the monsoon season in India remind us of an elephant. Kāli-dāsa, the fourth- or fifth-century poet and dramatist, describes clouds being transformed into young elephants and falling down into the gardens of the mansions of the *yakṣas* [*Meghadūta* 2]. In this, he may have been influenced by the Buddhist legend. Elephants were close to the Indians; they were employed in both war and peace and were thought to give life to both human beings and animals by calling on the rain clouds and so bringing about a successful harvest.

(Nakamura, 2000:58 quoting Zimmer, 1960 1:160)

2.6 THE SOOTHSAYERS' PREDICTION

2.6.1 When Māyā woke up from her auspicious dream, she went into a grove of Ashoka trees (*Saraca asoca*), and sent for her husband, Suddhodana. She happily related her dream to him. Suddhodana, in turn, summoned **64 eminent brahmin soothsayers**. He made the traditional preparations for them. He had the floor smeared with fresh cow-dung (*harit'upalittāya*), and spread out luxurious seats. He served them with sumptuous milk-rice prepared with ghee, honey and molasses in gold and silver bowls, with gold and silver trays. He further delighted them with other gifts, such as unbleached cloth and tawny cattle. When the brahmins' every wish had been satisfied, Suddhodana asked them about the significance of Māyā's dream.

The brahmins replied: "Be not anxious, maharajah, a foetus has formed in the queen's womb. He is a male child, not female. You will have a son. If he lives the household life, he will become a world monarch, but if he leaves home and renounces, he will be the Buddha who will remove the veil of the world."²⁵⁶ (J 1:50 f)²⁵⁷

2.6.2 For the brahmin soothsayers to make such a remarkable prediction, there must already be prevalent an ancient tradition or belief in a *buddha*, one who fully understands (*bujjhati*)²⁵⁸ and who is able to awaken (*bodheti*)²⁵⁹ others through his teachings. However, we have no such record of the buddha-ideal

²⁵⁵ Pruden's tr: Abdhk 1988 2:390.

²⁵⁶ *Brāhmaṇā āhaṃsu, mā cintayi mahārāja, deviyā te kucchimhi gabbho patitṭhito, so ca kho purisa, gabbho na itthi, gabbho, putto te bhavissati, so sace agāraṃ ajjhāvasissati rājā bhavissati cakka, vattī, sace agārā nikkhamma pabbajissati buddho loke vivatta-c, chaddo'ti.* The "veil" here are ignorance and craving, the roots of suffering.

²⁵⁷ For non-Pali refs of Māyā's dream, see Nakamura 2000:400 n106.

²⁵⁸ *Bujjhati*, "he awakens (to true reality), knows, understands": D 2:249; S 1:74, 198; Dh 136, 286; Tha 146; J 3:331, 4:49, 425.

²⁵⁹ *Bodheti*, "he makes (others) awaken": S 1:170*, 171*; B 17*; Ap 2:356*, 468. Note that, unlike *bujjhati* which is more common in the older strata of suttas, *bodheti* appears only in later canonical works. The significance here is that it is not so much the Buddha as a person (a deity) who awakens others, but rather the Buddha as Dhamma, his

in India before the Buddha's time nor in the scriptures of the brahmins or the other faiths or the traditions of the time. Of course, it is unlikely that these outside systems would highlight, or even mention such a teacher as the Buddha who rejected their teachings and traditions.

We are also aware that most of these miraculous stories we know of were compiled by early saints, the sutta reciters, and the commentators like Buddhaghosa (early 5th cent)²⁶⁰ and Dhammapāla (c 5th cent, after Buddhaghosa),²⁶¹ often based on some earlier traditions, or even some “floating traditions,” that is, a common pool or collective memories of stories, sacred and profane. One thing is clear—the Buddha has arisen in the world (in the middle Gangetic plain)—and it is the Buddhist genius for teaching and dramatizing the Buddha's presence that touched countless lives, and continues to do so to this day and to inspire us to live the Dharma-spirited life.

We today may have more sophisticated audiovisual techniques and digital effects: we have more than mere words to enthrall and convert others to the truth and beauty of Buddhism. The idea of touching the hearts of others so that they open to the truth is still the same.

2.7 THE GESTATING BODHISATTVA

2.7.1 The Jātaka Nidāna now describes the Bodhisattva in Māyā's womb, thus:

“(1) THE IDEAL MOTHER. When the Bodhisattva had thus taken conception, from that moment, 4 young devas with sword in hand stood guard over the Bodhisattva and his mother against any calamity or hindrance. No lustful thought for men ever arose in the Bodhisattva's mother. Her body untiring, she was happy to bear the foremost of gain, the foremost of fame (*lābh'agga,yas'agga-p,pattā*).

(2) THE UNIQUE CHILD. The Bodhisattva in her womb could be clearly seen, looking like a yellow thread through clear crystal. Since the womb in which a Bodhisattva had dwelled was like a relic-chamber of a shrine (*cetiya,kuṭi*), and no other being could lay in or use, the mother who bore the Bodhisattva was reborn in the heavenly city of Tusita. (MA 4:182,2)

(3) THE FINAL BIRTH. Unlike other women, who deliver before or after a full 10 lunar months, some seated, some lying down, the Bodhisattva's mother nourished him for 10 months in her womb and delivered him standing.

This is the nature of things (*dhammatā*) with the Bodhisattva's mother. (J 1:51,28-52,7)

2.7.2 Preparing for the advent

2.7.2.0 This is clearly the most imaginative of the miraculous accounts so far. The basic idea is all the same: that of preparing us for the Buddha's advent. Let us briefly examine the meaning and significance of each of these three episodes.

(1) THE IDEAL MOTHER

2.7.2.1 Māyā is represented as the ideal mother undergoing the traditional “womb protection” (*gabha,parihāra*):²⁶² contented, even gratified, since she had what was most important to an Indian woman: a child. Her womanhood was fulfilled. The 4 celestial guards—that is, 4 “young devas” (*deva,putta*)—were there to protect both mother and child. These 4 devas, says the Commentaries, were the 4 great

realization that awakens others. This Dharma lives on even after the Buddha, so that even today we have access to the Dharma through our own understanding and awakening [18.4.6.3].

²⁶⁰ On Mahā,vihara, see SD 26.11 (3.1.3.3); SD 36.2 (4.4.3 n).

²⁶¹ On Dhammapāla, see SD 51.19 (1.2.4.1 n).

²⁶² MA 2:19,8 ≈ DhA 1:4,1; J 4:188,22;

guardian kings themselves,²⁶³ who protected the 4 quarters to ensure the safety of the “gestating” Bodhisattva. Apparently, it was the mother who needed the guarding, since the child was destined for buddhahood and nothing could get in his way.

This description is a summary of various canonical descriptions from **the Acchhariya,abbhūta Sutta** (M 123) [2.3.1.3], that is: (3) the womb protection; (4) the mother’s virtue; (5) the mother’s chastity; (6) the mother’s joy; (7) the mother’s health.

(2) THE UNIQUE CHILD

2.7.2.2 The gestating Bodhisattva is described in a remarkable way. He was not actually visible—as in **the Lalita Vistara**, where he is described as looking like a 6-month-old child, sitting in meditation posture in his tabernacle [18.2.1.2]! Again here, this is the narrator’s way of reminding us he was no ordinary child—he would become buddha.²⁶⁴

This description summarizes a more detailed description from **the Acchhariya,abbhūta Sutta** (M 123) [2.3.1.3], where the Buddha says: “And the Bodhisattva’s mother sees the Bodhisattva, fully endowed with limbs and parts, free from any defect of faculty, within her womb.”²⁶⁵

2.7.2.3 Again, this is a summary of a more detailed canonical description from **the Acchhariya,abbhūta Sutta** (M 123) [2.3.1.3]: (7) “a beautiful beryl gem of the purest water—eight faceted, well polished, clear, limpid, consummate in all its aspects, through which runs a blue, or yellow, or red, or white thread, or brown thread.”

This passage is actually the “consciousness” pericope found in **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2).²⁶⁶ There, it describes a meditator who directs his knowledge and vision to reflect his body—in vipassana-mode—as being composed of “form” and “consciousness” (or simply, as matter and mind). The above passage describes the Bodhisattva’s consciousness. What is invisible is used in a mythical and palpable way to describe the gestating Bodhisattva. After all, no one else—only Māyā—can see the fruit of her womb, just as a mother would visualize her unborn child.

(3) THE FINAL BIRTH

2.7.2.4 The two key words and themes of the 3rd passage are “a full 10 months” and “delivers him standing.” While we often hear that pregnancy as being 9 months long (divided into 3 periods called “trimesters,” most health-care providers refer to pregnancy as being 40 weeks long, starting with the mother’s last known menstrual period. This is, in fact, equal to 280 days or **10 lunar months**. A “full”10 months here signifies that the child is extraordinary, and the Bodhisattva is growing safely as expected.²⁶⁷

2.7.2.5 “**Standing**” here refers to the mother when she delivers the Bodhisattva into this world. As a rule, other mothers would give birth mostly *lying down*, or sometimes, *sitting*. Again here, a mythical convention is being applied: the way that the Bodhisattva arrives in this world is unique—only he, it seems arrives standing, that is, legs first, and his mother also delivers him standing. It is all an *upright* affair.

²⁶³ DA 2:437,30 = MA 4:183,16.

²⁶⁴ See Foucher 1963:26-28.

²⁶⁵ Cf Agni in the Ṛgveda described as “father of his father, shining everlasting in his mother’s womb” (*garbhe mātuḥ piṭuḥ pitā vididyutāno akṣare*, RV 6.16.35),

²⁶⁶ D 2,86/1:76 (SD 8.10).

²⁶⁷ For technical details on the months, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Month>.

2.7.3 The acts of the Buddha

Over time, the number of such miraculous events of the Bodhisattva and the Buddha increased and are also included in the Pali Canon. A sequence of 19 “marvels” (*abbhuta,dhamma*) are described in an appropriately titled text, **the Acchariya,abbhūta Sutta** (M 123), “the discourse on the wonderful and marvelous.”²⁶⁸ The Sutta is apparently an attempt to formulate a standard list of key events in the Buddha’s life.

The Acchariya,abbhūta Sutta is clearly a late canonical, even a post-Buddha, work, but before Asoka’s time, when the Pali canon was closed. It is likely that this Sutta was a response by the early elders to the early Mahāyāna doctrine of “**the 12 acts of the Buddha**.”²⁶⁹ The “Buddha” here is the “Transformation” (*nirmāṇa,kāya*), that is, the first of the “3 bodies” (*tri,kāya*),²⁷⁰ a Mahāyāna doctrine. Here is the list according to the Tibetan tradition (the proper names are in Sanskrit):²⁷¹

(1) the descent from Tuṣita;	<i>dga' ldan gyi gnas nas 'pho ba</i>
(2) entering the mother’s womb;	<i>lhums su zhugs pa</i>
(3) taking birth (Lumbinī);	<i>sku bltams pa</i>
(4) becoming skilled in various arts;	<i>bzo yi gnas la mkhas pa</i>
(5) delighting in the company of royal consorts;	<i>btsun mo'i 'khor dgyes rol ba</i>
(6) going forth and cultivating renunciation;	<i>rab tu byung ba</i>
(7) practising austerities for 6 years (Nairāñjana bank);	<i>dka' ba spyad pa</i>
(8) going to the foot of the bodhi tree (Bodh,gayā);	<i>byang chub snying por gshegs pa</i>
(9) overcoming Māra’s hosts;	<i>bdud btul ba</i>
(10) attaining full enlightenment;	<i>mngon par rdzogs par sangs rgyas pa</i>
(11) turning the Dharma wheel (Rṣi,patana);	<i>chos kyi 'khor lo bskor ba</i>
(12) passing into final nirvana (Kuśinagara).	<i>mya ngan las 'das pa</i>

2.7.4 Reading myths

2.7.4.1 Once again, let us remind ourselves of the nature of myths so that we have a smooth, enjoyable, even pleasantly surprising, reading of the miraculous life of the Bodhisattva. We need to tease out the import of the “implicit meaning” (*neyy'attha*) of the mythical.²⁷² Queen Māyā’s womb is simply a biological process (like that of any defiled human), but it is a tabernacle²⁷³ of the Buddha-to-be—which made her womb unique and sacred.

Such a miraculous story is merely a skillful means, a mundane mode of entertaining an easily distracted world, a means of preparing us for the Buddha’s advent. We are meant to “en-joy” such stories, rejoice at the good news, when the Dharma, too, will be accessible to us for our own liberation.

However—and here is a warning given at the beginning of an out-of-the-ordinary epic—do *not* stop here! Do *not* take these stories as “explicit” accounts (*nīt'attha*).²⁷⁴ If we do, then, we will end up with a

²⁶⁸ M 123/3:118-124 (SD 52.2).

²⁶⁹ Skt *dvā,daśa,buddha.kārya*; Chin 十二相成道 *shí èr xiàng chéng dào*; Tib *sangs rgyas kyi mdzad pa bcu gnyis*.

²⁷⁰ See SD 36.2 (7.1.1).

²⁷¹ For a list of 30-fold nature of things common to all the buddhas (*sama,timsa,vidhā dhammatā*) (BA 298 f): SD 36.2 (3.3.2.3).

²⁷² **Neyy'attha Nīt'attha S** (A 2.3.5+6), SD 2.6b.

²⁷³ “Tabernacle” (Hebrew, *mishkan*, meaning “residence, dwelling-place”) is an idea borrowed from Judaic mythology; “a temporary dwelling, generally movable, constructed of branches, boards, or canvas; a hut, tent, booth” (OED).

²⁷⁴ See **Neyy'attha Nīt'attha S** (A 2.3.5+6), SD 2.6b.

Buddhist theology, as has happened in much of later Buddhism, where the Buddha is neither human nor buddha—but has been made to become God. Mythology taken as it is, and nothing more, becomes theology.

2.7.4.2 Mythology is a dramatic, often joyful, always meaningful and purposeful, celebration of the Buddha and the Dharma. Theology is when we fix all such ideas as being some kind of “essence” or “design” by an external Agency. There is neither *essence* nor *agency* in any of these miraculous stories. They are meant to *entertain* and *educate* us regarding the Buddha, the discoverer of the path of awakening, and the Dharma, the teaching of that very path so that we journey safely and rightly for the final destination, nirvana. [1.2.1]

2.7.4.3 For this reason, **the Jātaka Nidāna** reminds us: “This is the nature of things with the Bodhisattva’s mother” (*ayaṃ bodhisatta, mātu dhammatā*). This reflects a canonical tradition. In **the Mahā’padāna Sutta** (D 14), all the 16 aspects of the Bodhisattva—from the descent to the first lion-roar after the nativity—have the same refrain: “This is the nature of things here” (*ayaṃ ettha dhammatā*). We can conveniently say that *dhammatā* here is a catchword for the miraculous and the mythical in the Buddha’s teaching that, as a rule, defy any rational explanation in the sense that they use the language of sacred literature and ancient lore.

2.7.5 If anything, we see miraculous stories of the Bodhisattva gathering momentum. The story of Māyā’s pregnancy is even “more miraculous than the earlier ones.”²⁷⁵ This is understandable that if a certain miraculous account takes centerstage in an episode (say the Bodhisattva’s descent), then, the following or later episodes should be even more dramatic or at least different, so as to capture the audience’s attention—just as in a good movie! Hence, the momentum builds up finally to the climax, which will, of course, be the great awakening. This is still a long way off in mythic time, and so we should be prepared for ever more miraculous stories, with greater significance.

3 Birth

3.1 LUMBINĪ

3.1.2 Journey to Deva,daha

3.1.2.1 Lumbinī²⁷⁶ was located to the east of Kapilavatthu²⁷⁷ [2.2.1.13] and west of Devadaha [3.1.2.3]. Previously known as Rummidei, it is today known by its original name, located in Rupandehi District in the south of Nepal Terai lowlands, bordering with India. This is where the Buddha was born in around 563 BCE (or around 483, according to scholars). It was re-discovered in 1896 by Nepalese archaeologists, led by Khadga Samsher Rana and assisted by Alois Anton Führer.

Following clues from the historical records of the Chinese pilgrims (5th-century) and Xuanzang (7th-century), they discovered a great stone pillar at Lumbinī. Führer postulated that the pillar was placed at

²⁷⁵ Foucher 1963:26; see his account of the “Gestation,” 1963:26-28, with a Bharhut stupa carving (c 2nd-1st cent BCE) of the descent of the white elephant and a Gandhāra relief of the Bodhisattva’s birth (2nd-5th cent CE).

²⁷⁶ **Lumbinī** as the Buddha’s birthplace, see **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,5.8), SD 9; Sn 683. Location: 27° 29’ 2.4” N, 83° 16’ 33.6” E; decimal: 27.484, 83.276. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lumbini>.

²⁷⁷ The distance between Kapilavatthu (local name, Kapilavastu) and Lumbinī is 55 km (34.2 mi) via the E-W Highway today; between Kapilavatthu and Devadaha is 66.8 km (41.5 mi).

the site by Maurya emperor Asoka in around 245 BCE.²⁷⁸ It was granted World Heritage status by UNESCO in 1997. [3.2.1.2]

3.1.2.2 Deva,daha (“lake of the gods”) was the market-town (*nigāma*) of the Koliyas,²⁷⁹ to which Mahā Māyā and her sister Pajāpatī belonged.²⁸⁰ Queen Mahā Māyā expressed her wish to visit Deva,daha, but enroute she stopped in the beautiful park where she gave birth to the Buddha.²⁸¹ It was located to the east of Kapilavatthu and west of Lumbinī. Today, it is called Dev Daha, located 10.7 km (6.7 mi) east of Butwal, in the Rupandehi District in the south of Nepal Terai.

Deva,daha was so called either because kings (the conventional “devas”) held their sports in it, or because it arose without any human intervention, hence, divine.²⁸² The name was later given to the village nearby.²⁸³

3.1.3 Māyā’s journey

3.1.3.1 Why did Māyā, in advanced pregnancy, decide **to travel back to her birthplace, Devadaha?** The answer is simply that, in ancient India, mothers-to-be, as a rule, would return to their parents’ home to deliver. This is understandable because she felt more comfortable and secure at such a crucial juncture in her life. Pregnant women in ancient India, as with women in most cultures throughout history, go through a confinement period—what better place than the home of one’s own parents to be present for the arrival of their grandchildren.

3.1.3.2 This **confinement practice** in traditional societies concerned ritual pollution. Birth entailed bodily fluids and a disruption in the daily lives of society. This was certainly the mores of Indian society then. Such rules and practices were the bases for what after the Buddha’s time came to be called “the Laws of Manu” (*manu,smṛti*), which attempt to regulate social life in terms of Brahmanism.²⁸⁴

A key component of such purity rituals involved water. This is understandable since the brahmins believed that even the waters of certain rivers, regarded as sacred, had purification powers. Such beliefs were, of course, unequivocally rejected by the Buddha, who teaches purity of mind, speech and action, not ritual purity.²⁸⁵

In mythical terms, the newborn Siddhattha was “naturally” purified, as was his mother, Māyā, too. In fact, immediately after the nativity, we are told that two streams of divine water, one warm, one cool, flowed out of the air and lustrated her. It should be understood that it was not these waters that purified them, but rather they *represent* the fact that they were already pure at this stage, and that the child Siddhattha would show us the path of inner purification in due course.

3.1.3.3 We may even see a celebrative mood in Māyā’s journey—after all, she was the queen, or at least a high noble amongst her people. The celebration was that she would be auspiciously fulfilling her duty as a woman in bringing forth a child and heir for the Sakya king or chief, Suddhodana. In the case of

²⁷⁸ See R K Mookerji, *Asoka*, London, 1928:27, Rummindei pillar 201 f.

²⁷⁹ M 2:214; S 3:5, 4:124.

²⁸⁰ MA 4:1, 5:95; AA 1:340; J 1:52; ThīA 75. 141; BA 226.

²⁸¹ MA 4:1, 182; SA 2:256; Apa 56; BA 274; J 1:52.

²⁸² *Devā vuccanti rājāno, tattha ca sakya,rājūnaṃ maṅgala,pokkharāṇī ahoṣi pāsādikā ārakkha,sampannā, sā devānaṃ dahattā “devadahan’ti paññāyittha* (MA 4:1).

²⁸³ MA 2:810; SA 2:186.

²⁸⁴ Composed just after the Buddha’s time, between 200 BCE and 200 CE. See SD 36.1 (1.7.1.1) & Basham 1989: 100-103. For details of the Laws of Manu, see Nakamura 2000:64.

²⁸⁵ See esp **Vatthūpama S** (M 7,19-20) + SD 28.12 (2.2).

Mahā Māyā, this event transformed, even upgraded, her life from being *a wife and queen* to being a mother and a queen mother, a primigravida (a woman who is pregnant for the first time).

3.1.3.4 On the other hand, we have the tragic story of **Paṭācārā**, who made an attempted return to her parents' home. But along the way, a quick series of tragedies struck: she lost *her husband, her two children, her whole family and her sanity*—all in the same day!²⁸⁶ In this special case, if she had not gone on her journey through the jungle in a thunderstorm, she would not have been inflicted with such epic losses. But, then, it was her last birth. Meeting the Buddha, she was healed, and her losses and pains brought her full insight into true reality, which moved her to tell her dramatic story for our lesson. She became an arhat in due course, and one of the greatest teachers amongst the nuns.²⁸⁷

3.2 THE BLESSED BIRTH

3.2.1 The nativity

3.2.1.1 The early Buddhist texts do not tell us much about the historical Buddha's birth. The mythical beauty of his life-story—a narrative technique common in ancient religions—reflect the popular literary genre of the times. The coming of the Buddha is the most auspicious event in this epoch of human history, and should be announced and recounted in a grandest and most eloquent manner of human language.

We are told that the Bodhisattva, after his sojourn in Tusita heaven, descended into our midst and entered his mother's right side.²⁸⁸ He dwelled in her womb for exactly 10 lunar months, during which time he remained calm, alert, perfectly formed in body, and unsullied by any defilement—sitting cross-legged as a seasoned meditator, deep in meditation.²⁸⁹ We are also told in some sources that Māyā was able to actually see and contemplate the “gestating” child inside of her.²⁹⁰

3.2.1.2 The Jātaka Nidāna then tell us that queen Māyā, having cared for the Bodhisattva in her womb for a full 10 months [2.7.2.4], “like oil in a vessel” (*pattena telam viya*), informed king Suddhodana of her desire to visit her parents' home in **Devadaha** [3.1.2.2]. The king consented and had the road from Kapilavatthu to Devadaha made even, and decorated with plantain trees, pots filled with water, with banners, streamers, and the like. She travelled in state with her retinue.

Between the two towns lay a pleasure-grove of sal trees, called **Lumbinī grove** (*lumbinī, vana*), which belonged to the people of both towns [3.1.2.1]. At that time—it was the month of Vesākha (April-May) [2.4.1.1]²⁹¹—all the trees were one mass of blossoms from the root to the crest. Between the branches and amongst the flowers the 5 varieties of bees swarmed, as did various birds in the trees and skies warbling sweetly. The whole of Lumbinī grove was like the Cittalatā park of Tāvātimsa heaven. (J 1:52)

3.2.1.3 Seeing such beauty, queen Māyā was at once inclined to sport there. As soon as they entered the grove, Māyā walked up to the foot of the sacred sal tree and wished to take hold of a branch. The

²⁸⁶ DhA 8.12/2:260-270, esp 2:261; ThīA 2.10/108-112, esp 109.

²⁸⁷ **Paṭācārā Thī** (Thī 112-116), SD 43.3.

²⁸⁸ See Thomas 1927, 1949:29-34; Nakamura 2000:54-68; Strong 2001, 2009:51-54. Penner 2009:21-23.

²⁸⁹ According to the late 19th-century Siamese Supreme Patriarch **Vajira,ñāṇa, varorasa**, this means that although the Bodhisattva would be surrounded by luxury in the mansions, he would not be drowned by them (*Life of the Buddha*, 1911:102).

²⁹⁰ See Foucher 1963:29 f.

²⁹¹ Skt *vaiśākha*; modern Vesak. On the Indian months, see SD 1.2 n; DEB App; & http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindu_calendar.

branch bent low like the tip of a well-seasoned cane, so that she easily stretched her hand and held it. At that very instant, it was time for the child to emerge (*gabbha,vuṭṭhāna*). As she stood there holding on to the sal branch, she gave birth to the Bodhisattva from her right side [3.2.2]. (J 1:52)

3.2.1.4 The Jātaka Nidāna relate to us how brahmas receive the newborn child, and how he emerges immaculately:

(1) Almost immediately, 4 great brahmas of pure minds, approached *with a golden net* to receive the Bodhisattva. Placing the child before his mother, they said: “O queen, rejoice, to you is born a mighty son!” (*attamanā devī hohi, mahesakkho te putto uppanno’ti*).

(2) Unlike other beings, when they leave their mother’s womb are smeared with foul impurities, the Bodhisattva left his mother’s womb like a Dharma-teacher descending from the pulpit (*dhamma,kathiko viya nissenīto otaranto*), or a man descending from a stairway, stretching out his hands and feet, standing erect, **pure and radiant**, shining like a precious gem on a piece of silk. (J 1:52 f)

(3) **The Acchariya,abbhuta Sutta 1** (A 4.127) describe—as its 1st of 4 marvels attending the appearance of the Buddha in the world—how the Bodhisattva in born, a great radiance and various miracles occur throughout the world.²⁹²

3.2.1.5 (1) The imagery of the **“4 great brahmas, pure in mind”** (*suddha,cittā mahā,brahmāno*) [3.2.1.3] portends at least 2 important teachings. The first is clearly about the 4 divine abodes (*brahma,-vihārā*)—lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity—which are a key set of teachings in early Buddhism, demythologizing²⁹³ the brahminical God-ideas and class-based rituals into the cultivation on inner godliness.²⁹⁴

The **“golden net”** (*suvaṇṇa,jāla*) of the brahmas is a well-known Dharma symbol—that of the **“perfect net”** (*brahma,jāla*). This is the name of the very first of suttas in the whole Sutta Piṭaka, serving like a guardian of the teaching.²⁹⁵ All the worldly views, especially in terms of religion, are, as it were, confined to a small pond and easily caught in this perfect net. This is a reminder that to hold views is to be caught in the world. Only when we are properly free from view, we rightly see true reality and are liberated.

(2) The theme of **purity** is very significant. What is described here is an external or ritual purity—a well-known claim by the brahmins as a class, that they are born pure. Here, we have the Bodhisattva who is truly born pure. But the purity does not stop there. It continues with true goodness represented by the Dharma-speaker descending from his pulpit or Dharma-seat—this represents the fully awakened Buddha descending from the heavens back to earth.

There is also the recurrence of the “descent” theme. During the 7th year of ministry, the Buddha spends the rains retreat in **Tāvatiṃsa**, teaching Abhidhamma (what is related to the Dhamma) to the devas there and also the deva Māyā, his mother (from Tusita).²⁹⁶ At the end of the rains retreat, the Buddha descends back to earth with the gods (*devārohaṇa*, “the divine descent”) at Saṅkassa.²⁹⁷ This is the descent from Tāvatiṃsa.²⁹⁸

²⁹² A 4.127,(1) (SD 52.2a).

²⁹³ On demythologizing, see SD 4.1 (3); SD 39.3 (3.3.4.3).

²⁹⁴ These are respectively love (*mettā*), ruth (*karuṇā*), joy (*muditā*) and peace (*upekkhā*): see SD 38.5.

²⁹⁵ **Brahma,jāla S** (D 1/1:1-46), SD 25.

²⁹⁶ See SD 26.1 (6.3).

²⁹⁷ Saṅkassa (also locally called Sankasia, Sankissa,Sankasya) is a city, 30 yojanas (leagues) west of Sāvattī (DhA 3:224). They are about 329 km (204 mi) apart.

²⁹⁸ See **Devorahaṇa Vatthu** (DhA 14.2) @ SD 27.5b (3.2.1).

3.2.2 The right side

3.2.2.1 Neither the suttas nor the commentaries seem to explain why the Bodhisattva was **born from the right side of Māyā**. In terms of comparative mythology, we can find a similar, probably older story of Indra, the Vedic god, king of the heavens, who was similarly born from the right side of his mother.²⁹⁹ If this is, indeed, the textual source of the myth of the right-side birth, then, the Buddha or the Buddhist story-tellers had skillfully incorporated the Vedic myth into the Buddha's birth story by way of "natural adaptation."³⁰⁰

3.2.2.2 Apparently, to be born through the normal birth-canal would not be in harmony with the prevailing mythical quality of the Bodhisattva's purity and glory. In mythical terms, not being born through the birth canal reflects a concern about one's "ultimate purity." However, purity is not the only concern here—if this were so, it would entail ritualism (as in Brahmanism). There is a higher, spiritual, reason for this "right" way of birth.

This is connected to a pan-Indian belief that the trauma of vaginal birth—the new-born's crushing struggle to free himself from the birth-canal is so traumatic that it wipes out the memory of previous lives. The theme here is **memory**—especially that of rebirth and karma. This seemed to be an ancient belief connected with rebirth, probably even before the Buddha's time.

3.2.2.3 Although the Saivite philosopher, Kauṇḍinya, wrote his key work, the Pañcārtha Bhāṣya, around 500 CE, his view on how the birth-process causes loss of all our memories of past lives probably reflected an old popular notion going back even to the Buddha's time. The relevant passage has been summarized by the Japanese scholar Minoru Hara, thus:

It is the *janma-duḥkha*, the severe pains one experiences at the time of birth that causes one to lose one's memory (*smṛti*) and knowledge (*vijñāna*) which the embryo is supposed to possess until the last moment inside the mother's womb. This pain is caused by mother's bodily processes, by the tightness of the birth-passage, and the encounter with powerful winds both inside and outside of the mother's womb. Because of this suffering at birth, the ordinary human being becomes *bāla*, meaning both "stupefied" and "a child." This is also the starting point of further suffering caused by ignorance.

(Kauṇḍinya's *Pañcārtha, bhāṣya & Viṣṇu, purāṇa*, summarized by Hara 1989:72 f)

3.2.2.4 The early Buddhists might have known about this idea, which they naturally adapted to show how the Buddha was born free from such pain and loss. He was not born through the birth-canal, like a normal child. He was born "womb-free" (*ayonija*). Being born womb-free, he was not traumatized by the pains of birth (Skt *janma, dukkha*; P *jāti, dukkha*); hence, he was able to recall his past lives.

This, however, is a mythical explanation, the purpose of which is to highlight **past-life recall** or *retro-cognition* as a special characteristic of the Buddha. It should not be understood as the cause or condition for rebirth-recall. We very well know that most arhats are able to recall at least some of their own past lives. Such retro-cognition is properly gained through cultivating the proper dhyanic meditation or through self-awakening. [17.1.2.1]

²⁹⁹ In Ṛgveda, Indra (king of the heavens) says to Aditī, mother of the gods: "Not this way will I go forth. Hard is the passage. I will emerge forth from the side!" (*nāham āto nir ayā durgahaitat tiraścātā pārśvan nir gamāni*, Ṛgveda 4.18.2).

³⁰⁰ On natural adaptation, see SD 39.3 (3.3.4).

3.2.2.5 There is another, somewhat surprising, mythical symbol for memory—the **elephant** of Māyā’s dream. An elephant—most modern ethologists tell us—is one of the world’s most intelligent animals. Its brain is similar to humans’ in terms of general connectivity and areas; it has as many neurons as a human brain,³⁰¹ suggesting a convergent evolution.³⁰² Most significantly, an elephant has a very good memory, and rarely forgets any significant events in its life.³⁰³

Since the Buddha is able to recall his previous lives, we may surmise that this could be at least partly due to the fact that he is not born vaginally.³⁰⁴ However, in keeping with the mythical theme of this essay, we should conclude—and rightly so, I must say—that the myth of the Bodhisattva’s **dextral birth** alludes (at least in part) to the Buddha’s knowledges (*abhiññā*) or powers (*bala*) of:

- (1) the recollection of past lives (*pubbe.nivāsānussati,ñāṇa*), and
- (2) the divine eye or knowledge of the arising and passing away of beings (according to their karma) (*cutūpapāta,ñāṇa*).³⁰⁵


3.2.2.6 The right—in terms of both location and direction—has great significance even in the suttas. The right side is, after all, the *right*. This is a mythical symbolic action to remind us of the uniqueness and goodness of the Buddha to come—a being of supreme purity, peerless goodness and unique awakening.

We keep our right side (*dakkhiṇa*) towards a sacred person or holy object, such as a stupa or shrine when circumambulating it (*padakkhiṇa*)—this is also said to be the “sunwise” direction (with the right shoulder towards the revered object). It is in the clockwise direction that the earth turns around the sun. The right side, then, alludes to the sun, especially in terms of light and life. Hence, the sutta often tell us of people who deeply respect the Buddha, when they take leave of the Buddha, do so “keeping the Blessed One to the right ...” (M 143).³⁰⁶

3.2.3 The sun imagery

3.2.3.1 This reminds us of the Buddha as being “**the kinsman of the sun**” [2.2.1.13]. The sun, after all, is the source of all life; the Buddha, as the spiritual sun, is the source of spiritual goodness and freedom. In art, the Buddha is often depicted with a sun-disc behind his head, and an aureola or aureole (which is a diminutive of Latin, *aurea*, “gold”) around his whole being³⁰⁷—meaning that he is fully self-awakened, shining radiantly in his unique awakened glory like the single golden sun of our solar system shining on our worlds and lives.³⁰⁸

³⁰¹ Gerard Roth, “Is the human brain unique?” (eds) M I Stamenov & V Gallese, *Mirror Neurons and the Evolution of Brain and Language*, Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2002:63-76.

³⁰² M Goodman, K Sterner, M Islam, M Uddin, C Sherwood, P Hof, Z Hou, L Lipovich, H Jia. (19 November 2009). “Phylogenomic analyses reveal convergent patterns of adaptive evolution in elephant and human ancestries.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 106,49, 19 Nov 2009: 20824-20829. doi:10.1073/pnas.-0911239106. PMC 2791620 . PMID 19926857.

³⁰³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elephant_cognition.

³⁰⁴ See Strong 2009:51.

³⁰⁵ **Te,vijja S** (D 13) @ SD 1.8 (2.2.2); **Cūḷa Hatthi,padôpama S** (M 27,23-25), SD 40.5. As nos. 7-8 of the Buddha’s 10 powers (*dasa,bala*), see **Mahā Sīha,nāda S** (M 12,17-19) SD 49.1.

³⁰⁶ **Anātha,piṇḍik’ovāda S** (M 143,18) n, SD 23.9.

³⁰⁷ See SD 49.4 (5.4.1.2).

³⁰⁸ The halo (surrounding the head) and the aureola (surrounding the whole figure) have been widely used in Indian art, esp in Buddhist iconography where it has appeared since at least the 1st cent CE; the Kushan [Bimaran casket](#) in the British Museum is dated 60 CE (at least between 30 BCE and 200 CE).

3.2.3.2 The Buddha is also said to have “golden skin” or golden complexion as the 11th of his 32 marks of the great man. Again here, we have an allusion to the sun and its cosmic significance.³⁰⁹ The Buddha is also like the sun that dispels darkness (ignorance), and Māra has never been able to defeat him in any way—the Buddha then is the true “**sol invictus**,”³¹⁰ the invincible sun of mythology.

3.2.4 Caesarean birth?

3.2.4.1 At least a couple of doctors I know have proposed that Māyā giving birth to the Bodhisattva from the right side suggested that she delivered him by way of a **caesarean section**. Invasive operation was known in the Buddha’s time, and the famous doctor Jīvaka was known to have operated on some of his patients.³¹¹ Apparently, the operation also negatively affected Māyā so that she died on the 7th day after giving birth.

3.2.4.2 Māyā might well have undergone a C-section to deliver the Bodhisattva—which would, however, go against the grain of the whole mythic tone of the birth narrative. Even if she had survived the alleged operation and lived on as the Bodhisattva’s mother, the great renunciation would still occur. (Otherwise, there would be no Buddha arising!) The Bodhisattva, being a strong-willed young man, or as a person traumatized by the 4 sights, would have his way in renouncing the world.

3.3 THE WATER LUSTRATION

3.3.1 Although the Jātaka Nidāna tells us that the Bodhisattva was born “pure and radiant,” without any defilement or blemish, he was still given the water lustration. **Two streams of water** came down from the sky, as if to wash the mother and child, and to allay the heat in their bodies. This can only be a ritual lustration to reassure the world that they should not have any doubt whatsoever in the purity, that is, the goodness, of the Buddha to come.

According to the Siamese Supreme Patriarch, Vajirañāṇavarorasa, the warm stream represents the Bodhisattva’s trials of self-mortification, while the cool stream stand for his own spiritual efforts (1911: 102). However, it is also possible to regard the cool stream as representing the sensual life of the prince in the mansions. And the 7 steps would then represent the “middle way” [13.2.2]. In other words, this was not a physical washing: it was a mythical symbolism or device to highlight the natural purity of the new born child.

3.3.2 Then, from the 4 brahmas who held the new-born child in a golden net, the 4 guardian kings received the child in a large cloth of antelope skin (stitched together), soft to the touch and worthy of ceremonial occasions. And from them, the people received him in a cushion of soft cloth (J 1:53). A moving account of celestial midwifery!

Clearly, the new born Bodhisattva was born into luxury and greatness. This was signified by the symbols of comfort and luxury. The brahmas and devas themselves held him in turn each in their own safety net—they would surely be there to protect this special child. His greatness was assured by the humans who then placed him on a soft cushion.

³⁰⁹ See **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 30,1.28.1), SD 36.9.

³¹⁰ **Sol Invictus** (“the Invincible Sun”) was the official sun god of the later Roman empire and a patron of soldiers. In 274 CE the Roman emperor, Aurelian, made it an official cult alongside the traditional Roman cults.

³¹¹ See SD 43.4 (2.2).

[3.4 THE 7 STEPS AND LION-ROAR](#)

[3.4.1 The 7 steps](#)

3.4.1.1 The newly born Bodhisattva, freeing himself from the hands of humans, stood upon the earth and faced the east, looking ahead. The many thousands of world-spheres became like a courtyard before him. The devas and humans there honoured him with scents and garlands, and said: “O great being, there is no other like you here. How can there be one superior to you?”

In this manner, he surveyed all **the 10 directions**, that is, the 4 quarters, the directions in between, the nadir and the zenith. This represents universality: the Buddha is supreme in the world in the sense that he is *the highest evolved of all beings*—hence, he is “teacher of gods and humans” (*satthā, deva, manussānaṃ*).³¹²

The Dharma is open to all beings, unifies all beings, liberates all beings. Those who are liberated or walking the path of awakening are de facto members of the global spiritual community—the “sangha of the 4 directions,” or, theoretically, we can also speak of the “sangha of the 10 directions,” especially when Buddhism spreads beyond earth to other planets or worlds.

3.4.1.2 Seeing no one to be his equal, he took 7 strides and then said: “Here is the north,” while Mahā Brahmā held a white parasol over him, Suyāma (lord of the Yāma devas)³¹³ a yak-tail whisk, and other devas followed carrying other royal regalia in their hands. At the seventh step, he stopped and standing upright, roared like a lordly bull [in a loud and resonant way] **a lion-roar**, beginning with the words: “I am the foremost in the world!” (*aggo’ham asmi lokassa*). (J 1:53)

According to Vajirañāṇavarorasa, **the 7 steps** represent the 7 main states wherein the Buddha’s teaching would dominate, namely, Kāśī-Kosala, Aṅga-Magadha, Sakya, Vajjī, Malla, Vamsā and Kuru. The Bodhisattva stopped at the end of the 7th step because, as the Buddha, he would attain final nirvana after he had firmly established the Dharma in all these 7 states (1911:101 f). This is, of course, an interesting idea. However, it should be noted that in this list, “Sakya” seems the odd-man-out because it was not one of the 16 states. Anyway, this is only a minor technicality.

[3.4.2 The lion-roar](#)

3.4.2.1 The full lion-roar of the newborn Bodhisattva is mentioned in the Dīgha Commentary. Stopping at the 7th step, the Bodhisattva loudly declares:

<i>Aggo’ham asmi lokassa</i>	The foremost am I in the world.	
<i>jeṭṭho’ham asmi lokassa</i>	The eldest am I in the world.	
<i>seṭṭho’ham asmi lokassa</i>	The best am I in the world.	
<i>ayam antimā jāti</i>	This is my last birth!	
<i>n’atthi dāni punnabbhavo</i>	There is no more rebirth here. ³¹⁴	(DA 2:437)

For those of speculative nature, these actions and words may pose great difficulty. Firstly, it’s hard for many modern readers to imagine a newborn child standing unaided, much less to take 7 steady steps, then to raise his right hand, and to “roar” these words in a stentorian voice! [3.4.1.2]. Secondly, it seems

³¹² On *satthā, deva, manussānaṃ*, see SD 15.7 (3.7).

³¹³ D 1:217; A 4:242.

³¹⁴ For artistic representations of this event, see eg Foucher 1905: 306; also Karetzky, 1992:17 and fig 16); Schlingloff, 1988:20.

to sound rather “self-righteous” (to the speculative-minded) that the Bodhisattva should utter such high-sounding “self-praises,” especially the first 3 lines. Thirdly, and most troubling, if the Bodhisattva already knew all this, all that ensued would lose all its impact and import—it is as if, he were merely going through the motions, just a play—the way the Mahāyāna envision him, a mere phantom of the “real” eternal and cosmic Buddha or the Dharma, *kaya*, the Mahāyānist Brahman (universal essence or soul of the brahmins).

This key event in the Bodhisattva’s life appears problematic when we take it as a historical event. It is more than a historical event—it is a mythical statement declaring the future state of Buddhahood that the child is destined for. Hence, we do not have to dismiss this beautiful well-known well-loved mythical episode as a late interpolation. In fact, doubts about the account can be easily cleared [3.4.2.3].

3.4.2.2 The act of **the newborn Bodhisattva walking and talking** is clearly a great miracle. Animals, as a rule, can naturally and effectively communicate with their own kind almost from birth. Humans, however, are unique in our ability to learn a language or languages.

Scientists have long questioned how we are able to do this and now a new study suggests that the sound-patterns of human languages are the product of an innate biological instinct—much like birdsong. Babies, it seems, are born with the basic fundamental knowledge of language. This report of the newborn Bodhisattva talking is, then, an interesting demonstration, or at least suggestion, that language is hard-wired into our minds even from birth, and perhaps before that.³¹⁵

According to early Buddhist psychology, language arises as a result of “thinking and pondering” (*vitakka, vicāra*),³¹⁶ which are, in turn, aspects of verbal formations (*vacī, saṅkhāra*).³¹⁷ In other words, language is inherent in our being. However, it remains in the preconscious level until we have conditioned ourselves to the language (that is, learn it). Here, the Buddhist psychology of language,³¹⁸ in principle, agrees with the findings of modern scientific research. The Bodhisattva’s talking immediately after he is born, in a significant way, represents this fact.

3.4.2.3 A key problem with taking **the newborn Bodhisattva’s lion-roar** [3.4.1.2] as being *historical* is that it would imply that his destiny is already fixed or predetermined (as in the Mahāyāna teachings). We have no good reason—we have, for example, no sutta teaching to clearly support such a notion—to make an exception of the Bodhisattva (say, because of his “perfection,” *pāramī* or *paramita*). This would contradict the teaching of karma and the Buddha’s humanity (it would suggest that he is a kind of deity or deified agency).

More importantly, this story is valuable not as a *historical* event, but for its mythical implication. As we have already noted [1.6.1.3], is a harbinger or an announcement of the coming of the Buddha. If we take this as being *historical*, then, we contradict basic teachings like karma. But, if we understand this remarkable story as being mythical [1.2.1.1], then, we accept the fact that the Bodhisattva was not an ordinary human, but someone capable of evolving into the highest of beings. It is **a vision of human evolution** or existential evolution.

Such a vision of a talking newborn infant is neither “prophetic” nor “miraculous,” but a pre-modern tradition of educating, and entertaining, the masses with a momentous event of global and timeless

³¹⁵ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2600623/Language-biological-instinct-Babies-dont-learn-develop-speech-theyre-BORN-ability.html>.

³¹⁶ In the 1st dhyana, *vitakka, vicāra* occurs “initial application” and “sustained application,” ie, subtle vestiges of linguistic processes that allow us to “seek” (*vitakka*) the meditation object and “stay” (*vicāra*) with it. See **Vitakka, -vicāra**, SD 33.4.

³¹⁷ On verbal formation, see **Cūḷa Vedalla S** (M 44,13-15) SD 40a.9 (2.4).

³¹⁸ On a psychology of language, see SD 17.4 (2-6).

wholesome impact *after the fact*. In other words, such “miraculous” stories were crafted *after* the Buddha’s time to highlight his spirituality, greatness and teaching.

Technically, this is a common technique used in religion to portray the faith’s central figure as a unique being—a method known as *vaticinium ex eventu* (“prophecy after the event”) or postdiction [3.4.4]. Unlike in other faiths—especially the prophecy-based ones—Buddhism does not see this in prophetic light (which has its serious problems), but simply as an effective, even necessary, means of educating, or at least informing, the masses of the Buddha’s advent and goodness.³¹⁹

3.4.3 Lotused feet

3.4.3.1 The Sanskrit versions—such as the Lalita, Vistara—add that **a lotus flower** springs forth from under each step that the Bodhisattva took before his foot could touch the ground. In other words, the lotuses held up the Bodhisattva’s feet. This mythic event was deeply significant. It symbolizes that the Buddha will be with us in the world, but he is not of the world. Being fully awakened, he has—like a beautiful lotus rising above the muddy waters—risen well above the ways of the world.³²⁰

Further, the child Bodhisattva, instead of facing *the north*, began by facing the “front” or first direction (by which the ancient Indians “oriented” themselves)—that is, east. Then, successively turned south, west, and north, at each point uttering a lion-roar. Then, with his head bent on the earth signifies that he will not only defeat Māra, but also teach the Dharma to free beings from the hells. Finally, he looked up to the sky—meaning, beings will look up to him for the Dharma.

3.4.3.2 The *Sumaṅgala, vilāsinī*, the Dīgha Commentary, gives an elaborate interpretation of what they call “signs” (*pubba, nimitta*) of the nativity, event by event, thus:

Standing on the earth	=	His attaining of the 4 bases of success (<i>iddhi, pada</i>). ³²¹
Facing the north	=	His winning over (spiritual conversion) the multitudes.
The 7 th steps	=	His attaining of the 7 limbs of awakening (<i>satta, bojjaṅga</i>). ³²²
The white parasol	=	His winning the “umbrella” of spiritual liberation (<i>vimutti</i>).
The fivefold regalia ³²³	=	His attaining the 5 liberations ⁴ (<i>pañca, vimutti</i>).
Looking all around	=	His attaining the unobstructed knowledge (omniscience) (Pm 1:131).
The majestic words ³²⁴	=	His turning of the wheel of truth (<i>dhmma, cakka-p, pavattana</i>).
The lion-roar ³²⁵	=	His attaining the final nirvana without remains. (DA 3:439 f; MA 4:123f)

These explanations are interesting. It suggests that Buddhaghosa, the compiler of the *Sumaṅgala, vilāsinī*, is attempting to demythologize the mythical aspects of these remarkable stories, and reinterpret or relate them to the actual events in the Buddha’s life or to his teachings.³²⁶ In this sense, **mythologization**

³¹⁹ See SD 52.2 (3.5.2).

³²⁰ See (**Pāda**) **Doṇa S** (A 4.36), SD 36.13.

³²¹ *Iddhi, pāda*: the will to attain mental dhyana, the effort to attain it, the mind to enjoy it, the investigation of that mental dhyana (D 2:213, 3:78).

³²² *Satta, bojjaṅga*: mindfulness, investigation of mental states, effort, zest, calm, concentration and equanimity (D 3:251, 282; Vbh 277).

³²³ *Pañca, rāja, kakudha, bhaṇḍāna* (J 5:264): royal fan, diadem, sword, sun-shade, slippers.

³²⁴ *Āsabhi, vācā, bhāsanam*, that is, all the words spoken by the new-born child Siddhārtha.

³²⁵ *Ayam-antimā jāti*, “This is my last birth!”

³²⁶ On disagreements on these details, see SD 36.2 (4.3.2).

is a hermeneutic approach to religious texts, interpreting or reinterpreting them in terms of the canonical teachings, or to help explain or elaborate on these teachings.³²⁷

3.4.4 The infant Bodhisattva made **his first lion-roar** (*sīha,nāda*) almost immediately after he was born [3.4.1.2]. This lion-roar presages the arising of the Buddha Dharma that will make even the gods tremble at the teaching and truth of *impermanence*, as stated in **the (Anicca) Sīha Sutta** (S 22.78).³²⁸ This lion-roar also symbolizes his moral courage or spiritual confidence in terms of the “4 intrepidities” (*catu vesārajja*), which are, in simple terms:

- (1) no one can rightly say that the Buddha is not fully awakened;
- (2) no one can rightly say that the Buddha has not destroyed his mental influxes;
- (3) no one can rightly say that the obstructions to spiritual development are not so; and
- (4) no one can rightly say that when he teaches Dharma, and anyone who follows it, will gain the complete ending of suffering.³²⁹

3.4.5 The episode of the Bodhisattva’s first lion-roar is not without problems. We don’t seem to have any other record of the infant Bodhisattva talking, not even to the old sage Asita, when he visited the newborn child [4.1]. We can only surmise that he started talking normally like any other child in due course. The lion-roar was, then, a kind of collective vision, or simply a myth dramatizing the greatness of child prodigy of cosmic spiritual significance.

If we take the myth of the Bodhisattva’s first lion-roar to be a historical event, then we are faced with a serious problem of determinism or fatalism—that he was already “fated” to become Buddha. All his actions after that were merely a “play” (*kīla*) so that he was accepted by the world. This is, in fact, a common Mahāyāna view of the Buddha. However, we have no evidence whatsoever from the suttas for such a view.

However, there is no such problem when we take this account as a myth, a symbolic language, pre-saging and highlighting the Bodhisattva’s role to come—that is, as the Buddha. The myth writers here already knew about the Buddha, and probably lived after the Buddha’s time. Hence, it is not difficult for them to be certain of the fact that the child would become Buddha. This way of presenting a myth is said to be *vaticinium ex eventu* (“prophecy after the event”) or postdiction [3.4.2.3]. It works admirably when properly applied in a mythical manner to highlight a Dharma teaching. This literary device may not work with historical events unless we have their sequence right and use it for the right reasons and wholesome purposes.³³⁰

3.5 MAHÔSADHA AND VESSANTARA

3.5.1 After giving us an account of the Bodhisattva’s first lion-roar (or sets of lion-roars), **the Jātaka Nidāna** tells us that this was not the first time he had done so. In fact, in three previous births, too, immediately upon leaving his mother’s womb, he did so, that is, as Mahôsadha, as Vess’antara and in this last birth as Gotama.³³¹

³²⁷ **Sigāl’ovāda S** (D 31) SD 4.1 (3); SD 39.3 (3.3.4.3).

³²⁸ S 22.78 (SD 42.10).

³²⁹ The Buddha’s 4 intrepidities: (**Catukka**) **Vesārajja S** (A 4.8) + SD 51.19 (2); **Mahā Sīha,nāda S** (M 12,22-28), SD 49.1 (3.6).

³³⁰ On *vaticinium ex eventu*, see SD 40b.3 (3.4.4.2).

³³¹ BA 275 f.

In the **Mahôsadha** birth, just before he left his mother's womb, Sakra, the king of the devas, came and placed a piece of sandalwood core in his hand and then departed. Mahosadha held the sandalwood in his fist and came forth. Then, his mother asked:

"What have you brought with you, dear?"

"A medicine, mother."

On account of his coming into the world bringing medicine with him, they named him **Osadha Dāraka** ("medicine boy").

They placed the medicine in an earthenware vessel. By itself, it served as a panacea for healing the blind, the deaf, and others who came. On account of the reputation, "Great is this medicine! Great is this medicine!" he received the name Mahosadha ("great medicine").³³²

3.5.2 In the Bodhisattva's birth as **Vessantara**, as soon as he left his mother's womb, he asked:

"Mother, is there anything in the house? I wish to give something to charity."

Then, his mother took his hand in hers and placed in it a purse containing a thousand pieces, saying:

"You are born into a rich family, dear."

Hence, in this birth, too, he roared a lion-roar.

Thus did the Bodhisattva roar a lion-roar upon leaving his mother's womb in three births.³³³ (J 1:53 f)

3.5.3 The protagonists of the other two Jātaka stories (J 542+543) are mentioned here as having uttered their respective lion-roars as it dispelled our doubt that this only happened in the Bodhisattva's last birth. Clearly, we cannot place the Jātakas on the same level of authenticity and authority as the suttas. The Jātakas are valuable tools for teaching moral values and spiritual qualities. The events of the Jātakas are, as a rule, mythical. They are meant to illustrate or inspire these values and qualities in some dramatic fashion for our emulation.

The Buddha may well have, in some way, acted in the ways described in the Jātakas, but, as a rule, we do not regard them as historical events as we do the acts of the Buddha in the suttas. In an important way, the Jātakas impress on us the pattern that "good begets good, evil begets evil." This, however, is popular folklore. The sutta teaching on karma is more complicated than this.³³⁴

3.6 THE CONNATALS (SAHA, JĀTA)

3.6.1 On the day of the Bodhisattva's birth, 7 others were born, too: Rāhula's mother (*rāhula, mātā*), his future wife; Channa the minister, groom and charioteer; Kāl'udayī, companion and minister; the lordly pedigree elephant;³³⁵ the royal steed, Kanthaka; the great Bodhi tree; and the 4 treasure-troves. Of these 4, one was a gāvuta (a quarter yojana) across, another half a yojana, another 3 gāvutas, and the last a yojana. (J 1:54) [2.2.1.10]

3.6.2 Clearly here, this description hints at the world-monarch's **7 jewels** (*satta, ratana*), which were said to arise at the same time as the world-monarch. In fact, the parallels are very close:

³³² J 6:331 f; BA 275. For his story, see **Mahôsadha J** (J 542/4:329-478), also called Ummaga J (the tunnel). This Jātaka highlights his perfection of wisdom as a minister to king Videha.

³³³ J 6:485; BA 276. For his story, see **Vessantara J** (J 543/4:479).

³³⁴ On the consequentialist notion of karma, that "as we sow, so we shall reap," see **Isayo Samuddaka S** (S 903*) + SD 39.2 (2); SD 3.5 (1); SD 4.16 (2.5).

³³⁵ Some sources list this as Ānanda, but this is unlikely; for one, he would be too old to be the Buddha's personal attendant. He is prob only 26 when he becomes the Buddha's attendant. On Ānanda's age, see SD 37.4 (1.2.4.3).

The Buddha connatals

- (1) Rāhula's mother
- (2) Channa the groom
- (3) Kaḷ'udāyī his companion
- (4) The lordly pedigree elephant
- (5) The royal steed, Kanthaka
- (6) The great bodhi tree
- (7) The 4 treasure-troves

The world-monarch's 7 jewels³³⁶

- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| (5) The woman jewel | <i>itthi ratana</i> |
| (6) The steward jewel | <i>gaha,pati ratana</i> |
| (7) The commander jewel | <i>pariṇāyaka ratana</i> |
| (2) The elephant jewel | <i>hatthi ratana</i> |
| (3) The horse jewel | <i>assa ratana</i> |
| (1) The wheel jewel | <i>cakka ratana</i> |
| (4) The gem jewel | <i>maṇi ratana</i> |

This parallel is neither contrived nor accidental. We have already noted how the 64 brahmin soothsayers predicted the Bodhisattva's two destinies: he would either be a world-monarch or a world-teacher [2.6].

3.7 THE SAKYAS

3.7.1 The Buddha was a **Sākya**, but by the last years of his life, we see that the Sakyas were subject to Kosala [2.2.1.15]. This is, of course, no myth. Apparently, the Sakyas must have been a powerful nation in their own right before the rise of Magadha and Kosala. But with the rise of empires, republican Sakyas' power and sovereignty waned. [2.2.1.13]

We can imagine the Sakyas had hoped that the Bodhisattva (Siddhattha) would lead them as a nation. From the Sakya ancestry, we can guess that they regarded themselves as a sovereign nation. The way the young Bodhisattva was raised—to savour pleasure and power—was clearly a preparation for rulership.

However, **the Bodhisattva myths**—his past lives in the Jātakas and his last life up to the great awakening—reflect a preparation for buddhahood. Perhaps, the contemplative and pacifist nature of the Bodhisattva made him reject both pleasure and power and the uncertain political nature of his nation and the region as a whole. Hence, he chose the path of peace and freedom—which is to our common benefit.³³⁷

4 The naming**4.1 ASITA**

4.1.1 The next event related in **the Jātaka Nidāna** is the visit of **Kāla Devala** (known as Asita in the suttas) to see the child Bodhisattva. This account is canonical and is found in **the Nālaka Sutta** (Sn 3.11). The part of the Sutta related to our mythical study of the Bodhisattva's life is found in the Sutta's **Vatthu, gāthā**, "the story verses" (Sn 679-698) which are later than the closing section, **the Nālaka Gāthā** (Sn 699-723) which contains teachings on sagehood (*moneyya*). The whole Sutta is in verses.

4.1.2 Destiny and name

4.1.2.1 The Jātaka Nidāna recounts the events related in the Vatthu, gāthā of the Nālaka Sutta, that is, how the sage Asita (called Kāla Devala in the Jātaka Nidāna) learned of the Bodhisattva's birth from the Tāvatiṃsa devas celebrating the event (Sn 679-684). He rushed to the mansion to see the child (Sn 685-689). This visit occurred within the first 5 days of the Bodhisattva's birth [4.3.1], that is, before the day of the naming ceremony of the Bodhisattva.

³³⁶ See **Mahā Sudassana S** (D 17,1.7-17) + SD 36.12 (3); **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129,33-41), SD 2.22.

³³⁷ On the Buddha and the Sakyas, see Strong 2009:47-50.

4.1.2.2 A couple of details in the story which should interest us here, that is, Suddhodana’s first salutation to the child Bodhisattva, the “laugh and cry” episode [4.1.3] and his nephew Nālaka [4.2]. The Jātaka Nidāna tells us that Asita, when the Bodhisattva was brought to him, instead of allowing the child to salute him, at once rose to salute the child instead.

It is, clearly, against tradition and the old ways, that a venerable old and spiritually advanced ascetic should salute a child only few days old—unless the child was to become Buddha, who would challenge tradition and the old ways (Brahmanism and worldly systems) that were used as a means of social control and exploitation. The Buddha will present to the world **the path of freedom** by way of true moral virtue, beautiful mental cultivation and liberating wisdom.

Suddhodana, the Bodhisattva’s father, noticing this remarkable display of faith and reverence by Asita to his child, at once emulated him: he, too, bowed deeply to the Bodhisattva. Asita declared that the child would be Buddha. Hence, both the sage and the father saluted the child who was to be the father of man.

4.1.3 The Nālaka Sutta records **Asita’s “laugh and cry” episode** which is echoed in the Jātaka Nidāna (J 1:55). The related verses describe it thus:

Holding the bull of the Sakyas, <u>with a radiant heart</u> , raised his voice, Then, recalling his own departure,	the master of signs ³³⁸ and mantra-expert, “The peerless one, supreme of the two-legged!” downcast, <u>his tears rolled off</u> . (Sn 690-691ab)
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Asita explained to Suddhodana and his family that no danger would befall the child. It was simply that he was jubilant because the child would become the Buddha, but he was deeply saddened because he would not live long enough to meet the Buddha. (Sn 693)

4.2 NĀLAKA

Even though Asita knew that he would miss the Buddha and his teaching, he immediately visited his nephew **Nālaka**, advising him to renounce the world as a recluse in preparation for the Buddha’s advent, and be his disciple:

“When you hear from another the sound ‘Buddha,’
then, he has revealed the foremost teaching [the Dharma-path].³³⁹
Having gone there, asking about this doctrine,
live the holy life under the Lord.” (Sn 696)

The closing section of the Sutta—called **the Nālaka Gāthā** (Nālaka’s verses, Sn 699-723)—describes Nālaka’s visit to the Buddha and receiving teachings on sagehood from the Buddha. (Sn 723).³⁴⁰

³³⁸ “Signs,” *lakkhana*, ie, the 32 marks of the great man and its 80 lesser tokens: see SD 36.9 (3+4).

³³⁹ Comy glosses *dharmamagga* as both *dhamma, magga* and as *dhammam, agga* (SnA 2:489,27-29; see Miln 21,29 + Miln:H 29 n5). The alt tr shows that there are 2 possible readings here, both of which apply. This is a case of Pali polysemy: SD 1.1 (4.4.5); SD 10.16 (1.3.1-1.3.2). As a path, Comy explains *dhamma, magga* as “the path to nirvana, the highest reality” (*paramattha, dhammassa nibbānassa maggaṃ*, SnA 2:489,27).

³⁴⁰ For a special study, see **Nālaka Sutta** (Sn 3.11), SD 49.18.

4.3 THE NAMING CEREMONY

4.3.1 The Commentaries go on to relate the naming ceremony (*nāma,gahaṇa*) of the child Bodhisattva, which was on the 5th day after the birth. Suddhodana had the Bodhisattva’s head washed. Then, he had the royal abode perfumed with a concoction of 5 kinds of scents,³⁴¹ strewn about the 5 kinds of flowers with puffed rice.³⁴² He invited 108 brahmins³⁴³ for the great occasion, and served them with honeyed milk-rice (*madhu,pāyāsa*). Eight of them—Rāma, Dhaja, Lakkhaṇa, Mantī, Koṇḍañña, Bhoja, Suyāma and Sudatta—were readers of bodily marks.

Having examined the Bodhisattva, all but **Koṇḍañña** raised two fingers, prophesying two possibilities for the boy—that if he remained in the world as a householder, he would become a world monarch, but if he renounced the world, he would become the Buddha. Koṇḍañña, the youngest of them, however, raised only one finger: he decisively declared that the child would be Buddha. (J 1:55 f; BA 277)

4.3.2 It would be interesting to know how Suddhodana or his immediate family reacted to Koṇḍañña’s prophecy. It would probably be one hopeful skepticism or utter denial. They must have reacted in the same manner to Asita’s prophecy, too. This second time must be more difficult for them not to take the prophecy more seriously. [13.1.2]

4.3.3 The Jātaka Nidāna does not mention the name given to the boy at the naming ceremony; but the Buddha,vaṃsa Commentary mentions it as “Siddhatthā” (BA 277). But thereafter, the Jātaka Nidāna simply refers to him as Siddhattha Kumāra (for example, J 56), meaning the “boy” Siddhattha, but the word can also be rendered as “prince.”

The name Siddhattha is resolved as *siddha*, “accomplished, fulfilled” and *attha*, “wish, purpose, goodness”). It is probable that this name reflects Suddhodana’s gratification or hope that he now had a child who would take over his position.

His name should not be confused with another past Buddha of the same name, Siddhattha Buddha—as a rule, we refer to the Buddha of our epoch as “Gotama Buddha.” Siddhattha Buddha is the 9th past buddha from our own Gotama Buddha.³⁴⁴

4.4 PREDICTION: THE 4 SIGHTS

4.4.1 The youngest of the brahmins. When the naming ceremony was over, the brahmins departed. It is said that *7 of the 8 brahmins* (that is, except for the brahmin youth Koṇḍañña), returned to their respective homes and addressed their sons:

“We are old. It is uncertain when we will witness the son of the great rajah Suddhodana. You must renounce the world (live as ascetics). When he has attained ‘omniscience’ (*sabbaññutā*)³⁴⁵ (that is, buddhahood), go forth under his teaching!”

³⁴¹ *Catu,jātika,gandha*, also *-jātiya-* (Miln 254), ie, turmeric, jasmine, Turkish incense (*tarukkha*) and Greek incense (*yavana*). See PED & Miln:H 1:li -liii.

³⁴² *Lāja,pañcamāni kusumāni* (or *pupphāni*), J 1:55; DhA 1:112; VvA 31; cf J 2:240. *Lāja* is husked rice-grain heated (such as in a wok) until it pops and puffs up; when made into a ball with some sugar syrup, it is called “bertih” in Malay.

³⁴³ *Aṭṭha,sataṃ brāhmaṇe* (J 1:55); *aṭṭha,sate brāhmaṇe* (BA 277,11; BA:M 396). See CPD: aṭṭha-sata.

³⁴⁴ See SD 36.2 esp (3.4.3).

³⁴⁵ This is a more popular term for “buddhahood” or “awakening” than the more technical *bodhi*. On the nature of omniscience in early Buddhism, see **Kaṇṇaka-t,thala S** (M 90) SD 10.8 (2); **Sandaka S** (M 76,21+52), SD 35.7 (3.2); SD 36.2 (5.1.1.2).

Then, these 7 brahmins lived out the rest of their life-span according to their karma. The brahmin youth **Koṇḍañña** lived on healthily. Suddhodana then asked him,³⁴⁶

“Having seen what, will my son go forth?”

“When he has seen the 4 portents (*catu pubba, nimitta*).”

“What are they?”

“An old person (*jiṇṇa*), a sick person (*vyādhita*), a dead body (*mata*), a renunciant (*pabbajita*).” (BA 277).

4.4.2 Suddhodana’s precautions. Suddhodana then declared: “From now on, do not allow any such thing to come near my son! My son has no need of buddhahood. I wish to see him ruling with sovereign powers over the 4 continents, each surrounded by their 2000 islands, and holding sway over the regions, attended by a retinue crowding a circle of 36 yojanas!³⁴⁷” (J 1:57,7-10)

He placed a guard at every 3 gavutas³⁴⁸ in all the 4 quarters to prevent any **old man, sick man, dead man or recluse** coming within sight of the boy (BA 277). In an important way, Suddhodana clearly had no conscious choice but to take this course of action [4.4.4]. As a father and clan leader (or “king,” if you prefer), he could only desire his son to wear his shoes after him. Perhaps, even more so—in view of the declining power of the Sakyas (they were not even listed amongst the 16 great states) [2.2.1.18]—Suddhodana must have hoped that Siddhattha would lead the Sakyas in the rise of empires of the central Gangetic plain. [2.2.1.11]

4.4.3 Offers of sons. At this point, the Commentaries add a remarkable “cameo” episode. They tell us:

“On that day, at a place of festival, 80,000 families and relations gathered, and each dedicated a son, saying, ‘We will each offer a son. If he [Siddhattha] become Buddha, he will wander surrounded only by kshatriya recluses; if he become a world-monarch, he will wander about surrounded only by kshatriya youths!’³⁴⁹”

This episode, as it is, seemed more politically motivated rather than mythical. Perhaps, it reflected the Sakya concern regarding their waning power. If we take the number, 80,000 literally, it meant that the significant population of Sakyas was much smaller than those of the kingdoms, which were growing by the millions with their conquests and expansion. [2.2.1.15]

4.5 KONDAÑÑA

The Jātaka Nidāna adds an important episode showing the origins of **the group of 5 monks** (*pañca, -vaggiya*) who attended to the Bodhisattva, and later became his first disciples. We have noted that when the naming ceremony was over, 7 out of the 8 brahmin soothsayers instructed their sons to prepare them-

³⁴⁶ *Te pucchi*, lit “(he) asked them” (BA 277,28): this seems out of context here. Perhaps the correct reading is *taṃ pucchi*, “(Suddhodana) asked him (Koṇḍañña),” which is followed here.

³⁴⁷ This is a circumference of 435 km (270 mi). This seems to suggest the size of the world-monarch’s palace or royal city.

³⁴⁸ A *gāvuta* is a quarter *yojana*; in other words, 4 *gāvutas* = *yojana*. 1 *gāvuta* = 2.6 km (1.6 mi).

³⁴⁹ **J:** *Taṃ divasaṃ ca pana maṅgala-ṭṭhāne sannipatitesu asītiyā ñāti, kula, sahasse su ekekaṃ ekamaṃ puttamaṃ paṭijāni: ‘ayaṃ buddho vā hotu rājā vā, mayaṃ ekamaṃ ekamaṃ puttamaṃ dassāma, sace buddho pi bhavissati, khattiya, -samaṇeh’eva purakkhata, parivuto vicarissati. Sace rājā pi rājā bhavissati, khattiya, kumāreh’eva purakkhata, parivuto vicarissatīti* (J 57,13-18). **BA:** *Taṃ divasaṃ maṅgala-ṭṭhāne [Ee tasmim samaye] sannipatitesu asītiyā ñāti, -kula, sahasse su ekama-eko ekamaṃ ekamaṃ puttamaṃ paṭijāni: ‘ayaṃ buddho vā hotu rājā vā, mayaṃ ekamaṃ ekamaṃ puttamaṃ dassāma, sace buddho bhavissati, khattiya, samaṇeh’eva parivuto vicarissati. Sace rājā cakka.vattī bhavissati, khattiya, kumāreh’eva parivuto vicarissatīti* (BA 277,33-37).

selves for the Buddha's coming and become his disciples [4.4.1]. **Koṇḍañña** was not specifically mentioned because he was certain of the Bodhisattva's awakening as the Buddha.

Koṇḍañña's subsequent action clearly portends his vital role as the Buddha's first and seniormost disciple. In fact, the Jātaka Nidāna apparently breaks the narrative sequence to inform us how Koṇḍañña went about to get the first band of ascetics to follow the Bodhisattva when he renounced the world (J 1:56). We will examine this episode in its proper sequence [13.1.2].

4.6 MĀYĀ'S DEATH

4.6.1 Almost no mention of Māyā. Queen Mahā Māyā died on the 7th day after the Bodhisattva's birth. There is almost no direct mention of this in the suttas.³⁵⁰ It seemed as if the redactors and commentators were saddened or embarrassed by this fact. Or, that it was simply a real and sad loss with nothing more to speak of. We have already had some clear idea about Māyā's role and significance in the Bodhisattva's life [2.2.1.19-24], and even a special Sutta mentioning Māyā's short life³⁵¹ [2.2.2].

4.6.2 Mahā Pajāpatī Gotamī

4.6.2.1 After Māyā's death, he was brought up by his mother's younger sister, that is, maternal aunt, **Mahā,pajāpatī Gotamī** (*mahā* is part of her original name, not an honorific) as her own child. This probably implies that Mahā,pajāpatī was Suddhodana's 2nd wife or became his second wife. It is not uncommon in ancient Asia for a man to marry his dead wife's sister.³⁵²

We are told that Mahā,pajāpatī nursed Siddhattha herself, letting her wet nurses milk her own newborn son, Nanda. After all, Siddhattha was Suddhodana's eldest son. This story clearly highlights the point that Mahā,pajāpatī took very good care of Siddhattha. We will discuss below the implication of this account that Nanda was born within days of Siddhattha [4.6.2.2].

The point here is that the issue of Siddhattha lacking motherly love does not arise. Anyway, at 7 days old, he was too young to understand the loss of his own biological mother (if we take him as a normal human child). The fact remains that, **psychologically**, Mahā Māyā gives Siddhattha the human birth necessary for buddhahood, and Mahā,pajāpatī humanizes him through his remarkable childhood in preparation for buddhahood.

4.6.2.2 The Aṅguttara Nikāya Commentary informs us that when Mahā Māyā died (7 days after the Bodhisattva's birth), Suddhodana made Mahā,pajāpatī Gotamī, Māyā's younger sister, his chief queen (*agga,mahesī*). "At that time (or in time), prince Nanda was born" (*tasmim kale nanda,kumāro jāto*). She gave prince Nanda to the nurses and nursed the Bodhisattva herself (*ayam mahā,pajāpatī nanda,kumārā dhātīnam datvā sayam bodhisattam parihari*) (AA 1:340,20-25).

This account suggests two things: (1) Nanda was born some days after the Bodhisattva; (2) Mahā,-pajāpatī herself suckled (*parihari*, "she nursed," or *pariharati*, "she nurses,") the Bodhisattva (AA 1:340,-25). It is likely that it simply means that she personally "cared" for him (without suckling him).

Now, the adult **Nanda**, first met the Buddha during the latter's first visit to Kapila,vatthu, that is, in Phagguna (Feb-Mar) of the 2nd year of the ministry, when the Buddha was 36-38 years old.³⁵³ This was

³⁵⁰ But see **Mahā'padāna S**, D 2:7, 52, 53 (SD 49.8); ApA 18; J 1:15; DhA 4:89; ThaA 2:225; CA 39); she passed away a week after the Buddha's birth (Tha 534 f; DA 2:431). See Analayo 2012:23-26.

³⁵¹ On Māyā's death, see Foucher 1963:46-49.

³⁵² See Nakamura 2000:87.

³⁵³ D 16,5.27/2:151 (SD 9); see SD 47.12 (1.2). For details, see SD 43.7 (1).

also the occasion when, on his own wedding day itself, he reluctantly renounced the world—out of noblesse oblige—out of deference for his elder half-brother.³⁵⁴

If we accept these accounts as historical, then, Nanda, too, would be around 36-38. It was unlikely that Nandā had married so late. He was, after all, inclined towards sensual pleasures,³⁵⁵ and with Siddhattha's renunciation, he became Suddhodana's only heir. Moreover, it was customary for the Sakyas to marry very young.

On the other hand, if Nanda was born some years later than Siddhattha, then, Mahā,pajāpatī could not have suckled Siddhattha (she was not a lactating mother). However, we can, of course, understand the word “nursed” (*parihari*, present tense, *pariharati*), as simply that she “took personal care” of him. Hence, we are left with two possibilities: either that Nanda was born some years after Siddhattha or that he married late (in his 30s).

There is a possibility that the Buddha and Nanda could both be some 9 years younger than the traditional dates. Of Siddhattha **the Dahara Sutta** (S 3.1) says: “He is still young, and only newly gone forth.”³⁵⁶ This would mean that Siddhattha renounces the world at around 20 years old instead of 29—which would, of course, have had a more dramatic effect on his family. According to the Vinaya, the minimum age for renunciation as a monastic is “full 20 years” (*paripuṇṇa, vīsati, vasso*).³⁵⁷

4.6.2.3 Nanda probably has a younger sister, **Nandā** (Thī 82-86), the foremost of nuns who are meditators (*jhāyīnam*, A 1:25).³⁵⁸ As for the Buddha himself, besides having a half-brother, Nanda, and half-sister, Nandā, he has no other siblings. However, he has a number of cousins, including Ānanda, Anuruddha, Mahānāma and Deva,datta. Ānanda is certainly younger than the Buddha,³⁵⁹ but we have no information of the ages of the others.

4.6.2.4 After Suddhodana's death, **Mahā,pajāpatī** renounces the world as a nun (*bhikkhūṇī*). The Buddha initially refuses to admit her because of a number of social issues—especially the fact she is his own foster-mother. With Ānanda's intercession, the Buddha admits her by way of 8 special rules for her training.³⁶⁰ She is declared by the Buddha as being the foremost of his nuns in terms of seniority (this is probably her biological age, not monastic age) (A 1:25).

5 Boyhood

5.1 GREAT COMFORT

5.1.1 Life of comfort. The Commentaries go on to briefly state how Suddhodana appointed nurses of great beauty and free from all faults to look after the young Bodhisattva. He was raised in great comfort and luxury surrounded by a large retinue.³⁶¹

³⁵⁴ (**Arahatta**) **Nanda S** (U 3.2), SD 43.7.

³⁵⁵ See (**Arahatta**) **Nanda S** (U 3.2); DhA 1:117 f.

³⁵⁶ Pasenadi (the same age as the Buddha) says this of the Buddha in **Dahara S** (S 3.1,5), SD 42.11.

³⁵⁷ Ie, in lunar months, which would be usually 10 lunar months + 19 years. See Mv 1.75 (V 1:93). For the preconditions of admission in the order, see SD 45.16 (3.3.2).

³⁵⁸ See SD 43.7 (1.1.1.1).

³⁵⁹ Ānanda served as the Buddha's personal attendant during the 1st 25 years of the ministry. He is prob only 26 when he became the Buddha's attendant. On Ānanda's age, see SD 37.4 (1.2.4.3).

³⁶⁰ See **Dakkhiṇa Vibhaṅga S** (M 142), SD 1.9. For her ordination, see **A 8.51** = V 2:253-256 (SD 1.9 (2)); **Mahā,pajāpatī** **Ovāda S** (A 8.53 = V 2:258 f), SD 102.3. Her verses are at **Thī 157-162** and her passing-away is at **Ap 2:529-543**.

³⁶¹ J 1:57,17-20; BA 277,38-40.

When Siddhattha was 7, his father, Suddhodana, had his men dug within the palace-grounds **3 lotus ponds** in which were grown various kinds of lotuses. The Buddha recounts his luxurious life as a boy, thus:

I was delicate, O monks, extremely delicate, excessively delicate.

In my father's dwelling lotus-pools were made, one of blue lotuses (*uppala*), another of red lotuses (*paduma*), and another of white lotuses (*puṇḍarīka*), just for my pleasure.

Furthermore, bhikshus, I used no sandalwood that was not of Kāsī [Benares].

My turban, too, bhikshus, was of Kāsī cloth, as were my tunic, my under-robe, my cloak.

Night and day, bhikshus, a white parasol was held over me so that I should not be touched by cold or heat, by dust or grass or dew. (A 3.38,1/1:145), SD 63.7³⁶²

In due course, when Siddhattha reached adolescence, Suddhodana would build 3 pleasure-mansions for him [6.1.2.4].

5.1.2 The ploughing festival

5.1.2.1 One day, the Commentaries tell us, it was the king's **ploughing festival day** (*rañño vappa-maṅgala*)—strictly speaking, *vappa* means “sowing”; so, technically, it was the sowing festival. The whole city was decorated to look like a divine abode. All slaves, servants and others assembled for the festival wearing new garments and adorned with scents and garlands.

A thousand ploughs were assembled. On that day, 108 ploughs less one, together with their oxen, reins and ropes were ornamented with silver. The king's plough was decorated with red gold. The horns of the oxen, the reins and goad were decorated with gold. Suddhodana set out with a great retinue, taking his son along with him. Siddhattha was then 7 years old.³⁶³

5.1.2.2 Near the fields where Suddhodana worked on the land, there was a **jambul tree**³⁶⁴ with thick foliage, giving a pleasant shade. Suddhodana had a couch spread out for Siddhattha under a canopy, decorated with golden stars, and enclosed with curtains. After placing nurses there as guards, he went with his ministers to the field for the ploughing ritual, all decked up with decorations.

There, Suddhodana took the golden plough, the ministers took their 799 silver ploughs, and the ploughmen the remaining ploughs. With their ploughs, they ploughed in every direction. Suddhodana ploughed from the near side to the far side and back. There was a great display of splendour.

The nurses who were seated around the Bodhisattva came out of the curtained enclosure, wishing to witness the glory of Suddhodana. The Bodhisattva, seeing no one around him, quickly got up, sat down cross-legged, and went into meditation. Having focused on his breath, he gained the 1st dhyana.³⁶⁵

5.1.2.3 The nurses took their time, enjoying themselves with food and drink. The shadows of the other trees moved away (with the sun). **The shade** under the Bodhisattva's tree, however, remained in a circle right there (around him).³⁶⁶

³⁶² Cf D 2:21; M 1:504; Mvst 2:115 f.

³⁶³ J 1:57; BA 277 f.

³⁶⁴ The jambul is the black plum of India (*Eugenia jambolana*); it is *not* the jambu tree (*Syzygium aqueum*), which is not found in India, but in SE Asia: see **Kosala S 1** (A 10.29/5:59-65) @ SD 16.15 (3).

³⁶⁵ Both J 1:58,4 & BA 278,7 read *paṭhama-jjhānam nibbattesi*, “produced the 1st dhyana.” Only BA 2:278,7 adds *ānāpāne pariggahetvā*, “having mastered his in-and-out breath.”

³⁶⁶ *Sesa,rukkhānam chāyā ativattā tassa pana rukkhaṣṣa parimaṅḍalā hutvā aṭṭhāsi* (J 158); ... *parimaṅḍalā hutvā tatth'eva aṭṭhāsi* (BA 278,10).

Then, it occurred to the nurses, “The young master is all alone!” They hurried back and raised the curtained enclosure. As soon as they entered the enclosure, they saw the Bodhisattva seated cross-legged on the couch, and beheld the great miracle. The tree’s shade remained around the Bodhisattva despite the sun having moved away from the meridian.

The nurses hurried to Suddhodana and reported, “Maharajah, your son is thus seated. The shadows of all the other trees have moved away, but that of the jambul tree remains right there in a circle (around the child Siddhattha)!” Suddhodana rushed to the Bodhisattva and saw the miracle. He saluted his son, saying, “This is **the 2nd time**, dear, I pay homage to you!” (J 1:57 f; BA 277 f)³⁶⁷

[5.2 THE 1ST DHYANA](#)

[5.2.1 Sanskrit version](#)

5.2.1.1 Amongst the miraculous events of the Bodhisattva’s childhood, that of **the 1st dhyana and the standing shadow** was perhaps the most significant. Understandably, we have different versions of this important episode. The Sanskrit **Mahāvastu** gives some interesting details: The Bodhisattva was watching the soil being tilled and saw the ploughs throw up a snake and a frog. A young boy took the frog away for food but threw the snake away. The young Bodhisattva was deeply stirred by what he saw and quietly retired in the shade of a jambul tree. (Mvst 2:45)³⁶⁸

The Mahāvastu adds that before the 1st dhyana experience, the Bodhisattva was strolling in the garden (*bodhisatvo udyāna, bhūmīye anucaṁkramanto*). Then, he sat down under a jambul tree on his own.³⁶⁹ The Bodhisattva’s dhyana experience worried his father who feared that his son might go forth. To prevent this, Suddhodana got women to sing and dance for him.³⁷⁰ These details suggested that in the Mahāvastu account, the Bodhisattva was already a young man of at least late adolescence.

The Tibetan Dulva (Vinaya) and the Divyāvadāna, however, insert this account between the 4 sights and the renunciation.³⁷¹ In other words, the Bodhisattva was already in his late 20’s then. Putting this significant event so late in the Bodhisattva’s life makes it seem more historical, but for such a spiritually precocious child, we would have expected that he attained the 1st dhyana at 7 is more to his character.

Of course, if he were able to meditate into dhyana that young, he would have been able to do so later in his life, too. However, some may argue that such a childhood experience was quickly forgotten as the child matured—but we have a clear exception here: the child was the Bodhisattva who would become Buddha.

5.2.1.2 This episode in the Bodhisattva’s life is beautifully immortalized in Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* (1879), thus:

But looking deep, he saw
The thorns which grow upon this rose of life:
How the swart peasant sweated for his wage,

³⁶⁷ **Lalita, vistara** relates a later legend about his visit to a temple (*deva, kul’ālaya*) and its miracles: see Foucher 1963:37-39.

³⁶⁸ See foll n.

³⁶⁹ Basak 1965:64,4; Senart 1890: 45,4.

³⁷⁰ Basak 1965:202,4; Senart 1890:144,6.

³⁷¹ Rockhill 22 f; Divy 391. Buc 5.10 (Johnston 1936:46) and Saṅghabhedavastu (Gnoli 1977:76,24), with its Chin counterpart, T1450 (T24.114a19); cf T191 (T3.944b26) and its Tib counterpart (D (1) ’dul ba, nga 6b5 or Q (1030) ce 6a3). **Lalita, vistara** has 2 versions, one in prose and one in verse, but both resemble the Mvst account, where the Bodhisattva is represented as being very much older. **Milinda, pañha**, however, says that he was only one month old (*eka, māśiko sāmāno*, Miln 289,26).

Toiling for leave to live; and how he urged
 The great-eyed oxen through the flaming hours,
 Goading their velvet flanks; then marked he, too,
 How lizard fed on ant, and snake on him,
 And kite on both; and how the fish-hawk robbed
 The fish-tiger of that which it had seized;
 The shrike chasing the *bulbul*, which did chase
 The jeweled butterflies; till everywhere
 Each slew a slayer and in turn was slain,
 Life living upon death.

(*The Light of Asia*, Book the First)

5.2.2 Significance of the Bodhisattva's 1st dhyana

5.2.2.1 This episode of the child Siddhattha's meditating under the jambul tree represents a very significant symbolic aspect of meditation. The movement and shaping of shadows here represent the passage of time and the world. In meditating, the Bodhisattva transcended the world represented by the ploughing festival. At the same time, when we are concentrated in meditation, we also transcend time. Above all, meditation is the most natural thing to do—even a child could do it!³⁷²

5.2.2.2 The episode of the child Bodhisattva in dhyana is reported in **the Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36), thus:

“Aggivessana, it occurred to me, ‘I recall that when my father the Sakya was working,³⁷³ I was seated in the cool shade of a jambul tree,³⁷⁴

quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and dwelt in **the first dhyana** that is accompanied by initial application and sustained application, zest and joy born of seclusion.³⁷⁵

Could that be the path to awakening?’

Then, following on that mindfulness [memory],³⁷⁶ I realized, ‘That *is* the path to awakening!’

Aggivessana, it occurred to me, ‘Why **[247]** do I fear the pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual desires and unwholesome states?’³⁷⁷

Aggivessana, it occurred to me,

‘I fear not the pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual desires and unwholesome states!’³⁷⁸

(M 36,31-32, SD 49.4; MA 2:290 f)

³⁷² On this 1st dhyana's significance, see **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,31/1:246), SD 1.12; cf Chinese version, T1428.-781a-11.

³⁷³ *Abhijānāmi kho panāhaṃ pitu sakkassa kammante*. That is, occupied with the ploughing festival (*vappa, maṅgala*, “blessed (or royal or state) sowing”), ie, a national ritual sowing (MA 2:290; J 1:57). See (6.1.2). See also Horn-er, *Early Buddhism and the Taking of Life*, B C Law Volume, pt 1, Calcutta, 1945; BPS online 2008: passim.

³⁷⁴ *Sītāya jambu-c, chāyāya nisinno*. Following this, Nakamura, adds “on a path between the fields” (2000: 91,11), which is unattested in the Pali. Wujastyk (2004) says that *jambu* here is not the “rose-apple” (of Malacca and SE Asia) which was not found in India; it is properly the jambul or black plum.

³⁷⁵ On the significance of the Bodhisattva's “1st dhyana,” see (6.2).

³⁷⁶ *Satānusāri viññāṇaṃ ahoṣi*. Comy says that “mindfulness” (*sati* or *sata*) here is the mindfulness of the in-and-out-breaths (MA 2:291). Anyway, it may well simply be “remembered” (*sata*) (PED: *sata*²).

³⁷⁷ *Kiṃ nu kho ahaṃ tassa sukhasa bhāyāmi, yaṃ taṃ sukhaṃ aññatṛeva kāmehi aññatra akusalehi dhammehi-ti?*

³⁷⁸ On the 2 kinds of pleasures—sensual pleasure and the pleasure of renunciation—see **Araṇa Vibhaṅga S** (M 139,9.3/3:233), SD 7.8. On pleasure felt by the awakened mind, see **Uṇṇābha S** (S 51.15), SD 10.10.

We can see here that the Bodhisattva's spiritual progress has been gradual from the start. Even as a child, the Bodhisattva was spiritually precocious: he was compassionate and inclined to be contemplative.

His ability in dhyana meditation—although attaining only the 1st dhyana—later made him realize that there is pleasure that is not sense-based and worldly, but transcorporeal, even transhuman, and spiritual. It is the recall of this vital meditative experience as a child that prompted the ascetic Siddhattha to give up his self-mortification and turn to the middle way—that is, the breath meditation and dhyana—to attain buddhahood.

5.3 EDUCATION

As a kshatriya and scion of the ruling house, Siddhattha received both an academic education and martial training. Later legends depict him as being a precocious student and compassionate person.³⁷⁹ Some Chinese sources tell us that he started to learn to write as young as 7.³⁸⁰

It is notable that, even though Siddhattha was said to be of noble birth, he was not recorded as being home-tutored. Instead, he was said to have attended school, like other students. We do not have any historically reliable record of his schooling. What we know is mostly from legendary and late sources, but where their accounts concur, they are likely to have some basis in history.³⁸¹

6 Youth

6.1 THE 3 MANSIONS

6.1.1 Mansions for all seasons

6.1.1.1 When the Bodhisattva was 16, his father built for him **3 pleasure mansions**—called Ramma (9 stories), Suramma (7 stories) and Subha (5 stories), all equal in height³⁸²—one for each of the 3 Indian seasons: the cool (November-March), the hot (March-July) and the rainy (July to November). Suddhodana provided him with 40,000 dancing women [6.2.1.4]. Surrounded by such gaily dressed dancing women, Siddhattha was like a god surrounded by bebies of celestial nymphs, entertained with the music of an orchestra “without any men” (*nippurisa*).³⁸³ He lived in these 3 mansions [palaces] in rotation in keeping with the seasons, enjoying great luxury. Rāhula, mātā [Rāhula's mother] was his queen, the chief consort [6.2.1.4].

³⁷⁹ For legends regarding Siddhattha's education, see Gnoli pt 1 1957:57; Buc 2.18-19; 普曜經 *Pǔ yào jīng* (P'u yao ching, T186 fasc 2, T3.495a-b); 過去現在因果經 *Guòqù xiànzài yīngguǒ jīng* (Kuo ch'ü hsien tsai yin kuo ching, T189 fasc 1, T3.627c-628a); 方廣大莊嚴經 *Fāng guǎng dà zhuāng yán jīng* (Fang kuang ta chuang yen ching, T187 fasc 3, T3.556a-b); 佛所行讚經 *Fó suǒ xíng zàn jīng* (Fo suo hsing tsan ching, T192 fasc 1, T4.4b); 太子瑞心本起經 *Tàizǐ ruì xīn běn qǐ jīng* (T'ai tzu juei ying pen ching, T185 fasc 1, T3.474b-c).

³⁸⁰ 太子瑞心本起經 *Tàizǐ ruì xīn běn qǐ jīng* (T185 fasc 1, T3.474b-c); 過去現在因果經 *Guòqù xiànzài yīngguǒ jīng* (T189 fasc 1, T3.627c). On the Bodhisattva's age at this point, etc, see SD 49.4 (6.2).

³⁸¹ See Foucher 1963:53-63; Nakamura 2000:90 f.

³⁸² “All equal in height” (*ubbedhena sama-p, pamāṇā ahesum*) (only in BA 278,18 f). This is understandable: the hot-season mansion with less levels had higher ceilings for better ventilation to keep the mansion cool during the hot-season; the cold-season mansion, with more levels, had lower ceilings to keep in the heat; the 7-storey rainy-season mansion had medium-height ceilings to keep out the rain and moderate the temperature.

³⁸³ *Nippurisa* seems to be a wordplay. It can mean either “without men” or “without humans,” ie, “divine.” See n below ad loc at (**Paribbājaka**) **Māgandiya S** (M 75,10.2) passage on “the 3 mansions” [6.1.2.3].

6.1.1.2 All this was clearly part of Suddhodana’s plans to keep Siddhattha preoccupied with the world so that he would, in due course, take over the leadership of the Sakya tribe, even become a world-ruler—like Alexander the Great.³⁸⁴ He was able to do so while the Bodhisattva did not see any of the 4 sights [7], living a life of great ease and excess, surrounded by all imaginable pleasures for a young heir to his father’s realm. From ages 16 to 29—for 13 years—the Bodhisattva lived such a life, blissfully undistracted by the realities of life and the world. (J 1:58)

6.1.2 The lessons of luxury

6.1.2.1 Siddhattha’s life of luxury and pleasure in the 3 mansions (*pāsāda*) is well documented in the suttas, the Vinaya and the Commentaries, thus:

Jātaka Nidāna	(J 1:58)	[6.1.1]	description of the Bodhisattva;
Āṅguttara Commentary	(AA 2:238 f)		description of the Bodhisattva;
Mah’āpadāna Sutta	(D 14,1.38/2:21)	SD 49.8	description of the Bodhisattva Vipassī;
(Paribbājaka) Māgandiya Sutta	(M 75,10/1:504)	SD 31.5	the disadvantages of sensual pleasures;
Sukhumāla Sutta	(A 3.38/1:145)	SD 63.7	overcoming the 3 intoxications;
Mahā,vagga (Mv 1.7.1)	(V 1:15)	SD 11.2	description on the youth Yasa;
Cūḷa,vagga (Cv 7.1.1)	(V 2:180)		description of Anuruddha;
Mahā,vastu (Skt)	(Mvst 2:115) ³⁸⁵		description of the Bodhisattva.

This passage on the 3 mansions is well-known: it recurs in **the Yasa story** (Mv 1.7.1), **the Mahā’padāna Sutta** (D 14,1.38), **the (Paribbājaka) Māgandiya Sutta** (M 75,10), and **the Sukhumāla Sutta** (A 3.38,1). It is found in the Sanskrit **Mahāvastu**, which describes in detail the furnishings of these 3 mansions and other arrangements for the Bodhisattva’s amusement. **The Chinese Madhyama Āgama** version says: “I obtained the 5 types of sensual pleasures, with ease, without difficulty” (MĀ 153).³⁸⁶ Bareau, however, in comparing the passages in M 75 and in MĀ 153, thinks that the Chinese version preserves the more original version (1974a:214). Nevertheless, all this suggests that it is probably a well-known ancient story.

6.1.2.2 The ancient scribes mention very little about the sensual luxuries of the Bodhisattva. It is evident, however, that his life had been one of a royal Arab’s harem or the Indian *antaḥpura*. The Jātaka Nidāna, for example, mentions that there were 40,000 dancing girls serving him [6.2.1.4]. The 3 mansions were, in fact, pleasure-palaces, wherein Siddhattha enjoyed **the 5 capital pleasures** or the cords of sense-pleasures (*pañca kāma,guṇa*):³⁸⁷

- (1) the eye: dancing, consisting in the Indian manner of a sequence of more or less stylized poses combined so as to represent certain legendary dramas;
- (2) the ear: singing, probably the high-pitched tonality that delights Orientals, and music solos, which makes string or wind instruments, such as the sitar or the flute, “speak”; and orchestral music with the sustained rhythm of drums that accompanied the dancing; and
- (3) the nose: sweet scents to titillate the sense of smell;
- (4) the tongue: a variety of spiced dishes, sweets and intoxicating drinks; and
- (5) the body: the pleasure of women (mainly sexuality).

³⁸⁴ On the possibility of the influence of Alexander on the Buddhist myth of the “great man” (*mahā,purisa*), see SD 36.9 (4.2.1.1); cf **Mahā,purisa S** (S 47.11), SD 19.6.

³⁸⁵ Basak 1965:161,11; Senart 1890 2:115,8.

³⁸⁶ 得五欲功德, 易不難得 *dé wǔ yù gōngdé yì bù nándé* (MĀ 153 @ T1.671a24): see Analayo 2011:409.

³⁸⁷ SD 32.2 (1.2.2). As “object-based” sensuality, see **Nibbāna,sukha S** (A 9.34), SD 91.5.

It should be noted that the classic depiction of sensual and sexual pleasures is found in a secular work, **the Kāma Sūtra** (the discourse on sensuality), compiled probably around the Buddha's time or just after (400-200 BCE). In its present form, it is attributed to Vātsyāyana (2nd century CE). Although it is popularly perceived as a "sex manual," only 20% of it actually describes sexual pleasure, while the majority of it discusses a philosophy of love, the nature of desire, how it is triggered and sustained, and when it is good or bad. In short, it is a secular manual on worldly pleasures.

It should not, however, be confused with the Pali **Kāma Sutta** (Sn 4.1), whose theme is just the contrary of the Sanskrit work, Kāma Sūtra. The Kāma Sutta, on the other hand, a short but pithy sutta of 6 verses (Sn 766-771), opens by saying, "If it prospers a mortal to desire sensual pleasure, | surely he is joyful hearted in gaining what he wishes" (Sn 766).³⁸⁸ The phrase "joyful hearted" (*pīti,mano*)³⁸⁹ is given in the simple present, reflecting a natural truth, something that will always be the case.³⁹⁰

6.1.2.3 The (Paribbājaka) Māgandiya Sutta (M 75) is a special study in the dangers of sensual pleasures which throws some light on the canonical context of the story of the 3 mansions. In the course of his teaching the wanderer Māgandiya, the Buddha, alludes to his Bodhisattva's life of pleasure in **the 3 mansions** (or palaces):

THE BODHISATTVA'S SENSUAL LIFE

"Now, Māgandiya, in the past, while I lived the home life,
 I myself enjoyed, was provided with, attended by forms
 that are wished for, desirable, agreeable, likeable, connected with sensuality, arousing lust.
 I myself enjoyed, was provided with, attended by sounds
that are wished for, desirable, agreeable, likeable, connected with sensuality, arousing lust.
 I myself enjoyed, was provided with, attended by smells
that are wished for, desirable, agreeable, likeable, connected with sensuality, arousing lust.
 I myself enjoyed, was provided with, attended by tastes
that are wished for, desirable, agreeable, likeable, connected with sensuality, arousing lust.
 I myself enjoyed, was provided with, attended by touches
that are wished for, desirable, agreeable, likeable, connected with sensuality, arousing lust.
 10.2 Māgandiya, I had **3 mansions** [palaces].³⁹¹
 one for the hot season, one for the cold season, and one for the rains.

³⁸⁸ Sn 4.2/766-771/151 (SD 91.11).

³⁸⁹ M 1:37, 3:86; S 1.181; A 3:21, 5:3; Sn 766; Nm 3; J 3:411; Vbh 227.

³⁹⁰ See SD 49.4 (5.4.3.4 f).

³⁹¹ A *pāsāda* is prob a long storied mansion (S 51.14/5:270; VA 654; see V:H 2:16 n5, n6). **Jonathan S Walters**, in his journal article, "Suttas as History: Four approaches to the *Sermon on the Noble Quest* (Ariyapariyesanasutta)" (*History of Religions*, 1993) notes that the sutta "is full of startling silences: here we have no Suddhodana, no Mahāmāyā, no Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, no Yasodharā and Rāhula, no pleasure palace, no women of the harem, no four signs ..." (1993:276). The story of Suddhodana as a powerful and wealthy king is very likely a later legend: it is clear from the suttas that the Sakyas were vassals (*anuyuttā*) of king Pasenadi of Kosala (D 27,8/3:83). In **Pabbajjā S**, the young ascetic Siddhattha tells Bimbisāra that he (Siddhattha) is a "Kosala-dweller" (*Kosala niketino*), connoting that the Sakyas are a part of Kosala (Sn 422). Furthermore, in **Dhamma,dāyāda S** (M 89), Pasenadi tells the Buddha, "The Blessed One is a kshatriya and I am a kshatriya; the Blessed One is a Kosalan (*Kosalaka*) and I am a Kosalan" (M 89,-19/2:124). **Ambaṭṭha S** (D 3) gives a clear hint of the republican system of the Sakyas followed by a delightful analogy of the quail (D 3,1.13 f/1:91). See A K Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, 1970:45. As such, it is better to translate *pāsāda* as "mansion" rather than "palace."

In the rains mansion, during the 4 months of the rains, I was waited upon by only female musicians,³⁹² and did not come down to the ground floor of the mansion³⁹³ during those months.³⁹⁴

A PLEASURE THAT IS WHOLESOME

On another occasion, having understood, according to reality, the arising, and the disappearance, and the gratification, and the danger, and the escape, with regard to *sensual pleasures*,

I have abandoned *sensual lust*, removed fever for *sensual pleasure*, and dwelled free from thirst, with my mind inwardly stilled.

I see other beings who are not free of the lust for sensual pleasure, consumed by craving for sensual pleasures, burning with the fever for sensual pleasures, indulging in sensual pleasures, but neither do I envy them nor do I delight therein.

What is the reason for this?

Because, Māgandiya, there is a delight other than sensual pleasure, other than unwholesome states, which surpasses even heavenly joy.³⁹⁵

But I have attained and dwell in heavenly joy,³⁹⁶ and delighting in that, neither do I envy for what is low [inferior],³⁹⁷ nor delight therein.” (M 75,10), SD 31.5

6.1.2.4 The Buddha then declares that even more pleasurable than all these pleasures are those of the heaven of the 33. If we are enjoying the pleasure of the Nandana Grove (the celestial park of the heaven of the 33), we would not even consider the best of earthly pleasures. The idea here is that no matter how great earthly pleasures may be, there are still higher pleasures. The Buddha goes on to explain the nature of sensual pleasures with various parables. His teachings led Māgandiya to attain arhathood.³⁹⁸

6.1.2.5 When the Buddha says that bodily or sense-based pleasures are not all the pleasures there are and not even the best of them, he speaks from personal experience. His youthful years in the 3 pleasure-mansions have experientially taught him just that. This truth is further reinforced and authenticated by his 1st dhyana meditation, when he was only 7-years-old, which shows that there is a higher and greater pleasure—a spiritual pleasure of *the pure freed mind*.

6.1.2.6 The Sukhumāla Sutta (A 3.38) provides us with a valuable insight from the Buddha himself, recalling his life in the 3 mansions, and its significance in terms of his spiritual development. He describes his youthful pleasures, and how upon reflecting on them, even as he enjoyed them, he showed detachment to them. This does not mean that he did not indulge in them (as any healthy young kshatriya

³⁹² See n below ad loc at **(Paribbājaka) Māgandiya S** (M 75,10.2) passage on “the 3 mansions” [6.1.2.3].

³⁹³ “Did not come down to the ground floor of the mansion,” *na heṭṭhā ... pāsādam orohati*: see DPL: heṭṭhā. Alt tr “did not come down from the mansion.”

³⁹⁴ On the sources of episode of the 3 mansions, see (6.1.2.1).

³⁹⁵ Comy: This is said in connection with the joy of the attainment of the fruit (of arhathood) of the 4th dhyana (*catuttha-jjhāna, phala, samāpatti, ratim*) (MA 3: 216).

³⁹⁶ *Api dibbam sukham samadhigayha tiṭṭhati*. The word *samadhigayha* comes from *sam* + *adhi* + *gaṇhāti*, ie, to fully and well (in a mental sense). Comy glosses it as “having made a distinction,” *visesetvā* (MA 3:268).

³⁹⁷ *Hīnassa*, ie the pleasure of a low person (*hīna, jana, sukha*) and the 5 cords of human sense-pleasures (MA 3:217).

³⁹⁸ M 75/1:501-513 (SD 31.5).

would), but rather, in doing so—in obtaining all that the world can offer him in carnal pleasures—he realized that he (we) can never really have enough of them, and that this really leads us nowhere spiritually. The main section of the Sutta is reproduced here:³⁹⁹

“I had **3 mansions** [palaces]: one for the hot season, one for the cold season and one for the rains. In the rains mansion, during the 4 months of the rains, I was entertained by female musicians,⁴⁰⁰ and did not come down to the ground floor of the palace during those months.⁴⁰¹

(1) Bhikshus, amidst such splendour,⁴⁰² and because of such an exceedingly delicate⁴⁰³ life, this thought arose in me:

‘An untutored worldling, by nature, ages [decays] and is unable to escape ageing [decay],⁴⁰⁴ but he feels distressed, ashamed, disgusted⁴⁰⁵ on seeing an old or aged person, being forgetful of himself [of his own situation].

Now I, too, by nature, will age and cannot escape ageing. If, bhikshus, when seeing an old or aged person, I were to feel distressed, ashamed, disgusted, that would not be proper for one like myself.’⁴⁰⁶

When I reflected thus, bhikshus, all my **intoxication with youth** vanished.

(2) (Again I reflected:)

‘An untutored worldling, by nature, suffers disease and is unable to escape disease, but he feels distressed, ashamed, disgusted on seeing a sick person, being forgetful of himself.

Now I, too, by nature, will suffer disease and cannot escape disease. If, bhikshus, when seeing an ill person, I were to feel distressed, ashamed, disgusted, that would not be proper for one like myself.’

When I reflected thus, bhikshus, all my **intoxication with health** vanished.

(3) (Again I reflected:)

‘An untutored worldling, by nature, dies and is unable to escape dying, but he feels distressed, ashamed, disgusted on seeing a dead person, being forgetful of himself.

Now I, too, by nature will die and cannot escape dying. If, bhikshus, when seeing a dead person, I were to feel distressed, ashamed, disgusted, that would not be proper for one like myself.’

When I reflected thus, bhikshus, all my **intoxication with life** vanished.”

(A 3.38,2/1:145 f), SD 63.7

6.1.2.7 This Sutta is significant in showing us that even as a young man, *despite* living in the pleasure mansions—perhaps *because* of it—the Bodhisattva did not lose himself in abandonment. He observed

³⁹⁹ Technicalities and nn have been minimized here for the sake of narrative flow. See SD 63.7 for such details.

⁴⁰⁰ “By only female musicians,” *nippurisehi turiyehi*, lit “unmanned music,” possibly “divine music.” The Thai trs give it as ไม่มีมนุษย์เจือปน, “with no humans involved” (BUDSIR, Dhammadāna). However, from the context of the following para [2], it is clear that women are meant. See D:R 2:18 n1.

⁴⁰¹ This passage on the 3 mansions is also found in **Mahā’pādāna S** (D 14,1.43/2:21); see SD 52.1 (6.1.2).

⁴⁰² “Splendour,” *iddhi*, here in a mundane sense of “prosperity” or “success”

⁴⁰³ *Sukhumāla*, delicate in luxuriously refined style.

⁴⁰⁴ Cf **Jarā S** (Sn 4.6): “How short is this life! | One dies in less than a hundred years. | Even if one lives longer, | one dies of old age, all the same.” (Sn 804).

⁴⁰⁵ “Would feel pained, ashamed, disgusted,” *aṭṭiyeyyaṃ harāyeyyaṃ jeguccheyyaṃ*. For fuller analyses of these terms, see **Kevalāḍḍha S** (D 11,5/1:213), SD 1.7 n sv.

⁴⁰⁶ This reflection is that of a renunciant, that is, the Buddha before his awakening.

what he was enjoying, and noticed their nature and effects on his body. In other words, he learned first-hand of the nature of pleasure and the body. His later experiences and awakening only confirm such early insights of his life as a Bodhisattva in the pleasure mansions—that there is really nothing in youth, health and life that we can be attached to.

6.1.2.8 The lesson for us is that when we are caught up in worldliness of youth, health and life, we are even more painfully shadowed by the realities of decay, disease and death. Of course, it is a great blessing to be happy when we are young, healthy and long-lived—but true happiness does not come from youth, health or life itself. **True happiness** comes only from understanding their true nature—that they are all conditioned states, subject to change and cessation. In this way, we learn from our experiences as a basis for liberating wisdom, at least, to free oneself from being intoxicated by youth, health and life, and to rein them into the service of our true happiness and freedom. [7.1.1.2]

6.2 MARRIAGE

6.2.1.1 (The Buddha,vaṃsa Commentary gives us a more detailed narrative leading up to Siddhattha's marriage.) Then, Suddhodana thought, "My son has come of age. Having erected the royal parasol (*chatta*), I will see royal glory!"

Then, he declared, "My son, who has come of age,⁴⁰⁷ has sent messages of sorrow (*sokiyā pannā*). I will have him established in sovereignty. Let all the young girls who have come of age in their own houses enter this home."

When the girls' parents heard Suddhodana's message, they said, "The boy (*kumāra*), though blessed with every beauty, knows no craft⁴⁰⁸ whatsoever. He will not be able to maintain a wife. What will he do if war breaks out?⁴⁰⁹ We will not give him our daughters!"

Suddhodana, hearing of this, went to Siddhattha and informed him of the turn of events. Siddhattha said, "What craft must I display?"

"My dear, you must string the bow that requires the strength of a thousand men."⁴¹⁰

"Well, then, get the bow!" Suddhodana had the bow brought to his son Siddhattha. (BA 278; J 1:58)

6.2.1.2 The magnificent bow (that needed the strength of 1000 men) was handed to Siddhattha, who easily lifted it, along with its quiver of arrows. Sitting down cross-legged, he twirled one end of the bow-string around his big toe. Holding the shaft in his left hand and drawing the bow-string with his right, he strung it.

The whole city of Kapila,vatthu heard the sound of his act and became aware of it. When some asked: "What sound is that?" some said: "The rain-clouds are thundering!"

⁴⁰⁷ According to **Jātaka Nidāna**, he was only 16 then (*soḷasa,vassa,padesiko jāto*, J 1:58,12).

⁴⁰⁸ Clearly here "craft" (*sippa*) or "arts" did not refer to means of livelihood, as Siddhattha's family was already very wealthy. From the context (see foll para), it clearly referred to "kshatriya's skills," ie, in combat and warfare.

⁴⁰⁹ *Saṅgāme paccupaṭṭhite kiṃ karissatīti*. This important line is found only at J 1:58,22.

⁴¹⁰ **BA 278** alludes to **Mahā,janaka J** (J 539). In a past life (recorded in 2nd of the last 10 jatakas), as prince Mahā Janaka, he had strung such a bow, too (J 529/6:38). **J 1:58** alludes to a similar action by the brahmin youth Jotipāla, the son of the purohit of Brahmadatta, king of Benares: see **Sara,bhaṅga J** (J 522/5:129 f).

But others said: “It’s not the rain-clouds. Don’t you know? That is the sound of the bow-string after prince Aṅgī,rasa⁴¹¹ had strung the bow with the strength of 1000 men!”

At once, the Sakyas, hearing that, were satisfied and rejoiced in their hearts. (BA 278)

6.2.1.3 The Buddha,vaṃsa Commentary continues describing how the Bodhisattva proved his skills in archery. He was able to let his arrow pierce a piece of asana-wood⁴¹² 4 finger-breadths thick; pierce a sheet of iron 8 finger-breadths thick; pierce a plank of fig-wood 12 finger-breadths thick; pierce a wagon of sand; pierce a wagon of sand and a wagon of straw; enter into water as far as 1 cubit (*usabha*);⁴¹³ enter the dry ground for a depth of 8 cubits; and shoot into a horse-hair on an egg-plant placed a yojana away, which he did under a storm-cloud in the dark of night! (BA 278 f)

We were not told whether it was a magical bow or that Siddhattha had magical powers—like some ancient hero. Such a tale is surely to impress on us that Siddhattha was not a softie despite his sheltered upbringing and life of pleasure. He was skilled in the martial arts. After all, he was predicted to become a world monarch if he were to remain a person of the world; or, at least the heir to the Sakya chieftom after Siddhodana.

6.2.1.4 The Sākyans were naturally impressed at Siddhattha’s skills. They each sent him a daughter, the total of whom were 40,000 women! The Bodhisattva appointed as his chief consort the daughter of Suppabuddha, who, in due course, came to be called **Rāhula,mātā**⁴¹⁴ or **Yaso,dharā**.⁴¹⁵ [6.1.1.1]

Such numbers, though exaggerated by our modern standards, are understandable. Royalty were known to broadly cast their seeds so that their blood was thicker than the water of the enemy floods in uncertain times, especially war. Loyalty was valuable in a world of political intrigues and uncertainty. Kinship, then, was a matter of survival for kingship.

6.2.1.5 We have a problem of narrative sequence here. Earlier on, we were told that he already had **Rāhula,mātā** or Yasodharā as his chief consort in the 3 palaces [6.1.1.1]. We must surmise, then, that this episode should be placed *before* that of the women in the 3 mansions (as suggested by the Buddha,vaṃsa Commentary). However, Siddhattha, as a youth, spent most of his time in these pleasure mansions, that is, even before he was married *and* after marriage, that is, until he was 29. [8.3.1.2]

In fact, the Buddhavaṃsa Commentary says: “There were 40,000 dancing women. Rahula,mātā was his queen, the chief consort. The great man (*mahā,purisa*), like a celestial prince (*deva,kumāra*) surrounded by youthful goddesses (*sura,yuvatī*), being entertained by the music of women (*nippurisehi turiyehi*),

⁴¹¹ Aṅgī,rasa or Aṅgī,rasa: A name applied to the Buddha many times in the Tipiṭaka: eg V 1:25; D 3:196; S 1:196; A 3:239; Tha 536, 1252; J 1:116. Comys give 3 etymologies: Buddhaghosa says it means “emitting light-rays of various hues from the body” (DA 3:701; J 5:145; ApA 369), a term applicable to all buddhas (DA 3:963; SA 1:152; AA 3:316). Dhammapāla adds that it signifies being possessed of attainments such as moral virtue (ThaA 2:226), and also that, according to some, Aṅgīrasa was a personal name given by the Buddha’s father to him in addition to Siddhattha (ThaA 2:226; ApA 361). In fact, Comy refers to him as Aṅgīrasa Kumāra (AA 2:240; ThaA 2:226; BA 278; ApA 361). According to Vedic tradition, the Gautamas (P *gotama*) belonged to the Aṅgīrasa clan (*Vedic Index*: Gotama). As applied to the Buddha, it is prob patronymic—a case where a kshatriya clan laid claim to a brahmin *gotra* (Thomas 1949:22 f).

⁴¹² *Asana* is the wood of a large tree, *Terminalia fomentosa* (or *glabra*) or Indian Laurel.

⁴¹³ 1 *usabha* = 140 cubits. A “cubit” (*hattha*, “hand”) is the forearm length from the tip of the middle finger to the bottom of the elbow, about 45 cm (18 ins): SD 4.17 (1.3.2); SD 30.9 (3.1). See n on cubit at (8.2.3).

⁴¹⁴ She is also known under the names Bhaddakaccā (or Kaccānā), Bimbā, Bimba,sundarī and Gopā. See foll n.

⁴¹⁵ *Yaso,dhara* (“bearer of fame”): ThaA 2:124; BA 294,20; ApA 323. For details, see Ency Bsm 8:784-791 (*Yaso,dharā*).

and enjoying great luxury, stayed in one of the 3 mansions in accordance with the seasons.” (BA 279,14-18).

7 The 4 sights

7.1 Sarīvega and pasāda

7.1.1 The 4 divine messengers

7.1.1.1 It should be noted [7.1.3.2] that Siddhattha was 29 when events took a turn spurring him to renounce the world. Following prognostication of the twin destinies by the 7 brahmins, and Koṇḍañña’s certain prophecy, Suddhodana took every precaution *to prevent his son from seeing any sign of old age, sickness or death*. But apparently, man may propose but the gods dispose—as if to ensure that things are right in the Bodhisattva’s life and with the world. [7.2.1.1]

Apparently, in mythical terms, the devas decided that the time had come for the great awakening. Like the Muses of Greek mythology,⁴¹⁶ they instilled in Siddhattha’s heart a desire to get out of the mansion and go into the park. The import of this myth is clear: the seed that stays in the tree’s shadow will not grow, but must cast itself wide afield into the world.

7.1.1.2 Along the way taken by the Bodhisattva, the devas projected first an image of a person in extreme old age. Seeing this, the Bodhisattva returned to the mansion with a heavy heart. The king, noticing the ominous sign, at once, increased the guards throughout the area, a gavuta apart [4.2.2], and surrounded him with even greater sensual distractions.

However, when the Bodhisattva ventured out into the park again, the devas displayed a severely sick person, with the same effect on the Bodhisattva. On yet another day, in his outing, the Bodhisattva saw the third of these “divine messengers” (*deva, dūta*) [7.1.2.1], as they were called: a corpse borne on a litter heading for the pyre.

The 4th sight was different: it was a peaceful and reassuring sight of a calm and happy renunciant (*pabbājita*). For such a spiritually precocious youth as the Bodhisattva, the import of these signs was clear: we and all that we hold dear are all naturally marked with **decay, disease and death**—the 3 great “evils” or “bads.”⁴¹⁷ And *the way out* was suggested by the 4th sight—that is, the way of renunciation.⁴¹⁸ (J 1:59)

7.1.1.3 The Buddha,vaṃsa Commentary (BA 280) explains that the timing of the Bodhisattva’s seeing each of the 4 sights depends on the lifespan of humans then. A Bodhisattva of long lifespan—the Bodhisattva Vipassī [6.1.2.1], for example, lived for 80,000 years⁴¹⁹—will see each of the sights every hundred years. In the case of **the Bodhisattva Gotama** (the Buddha is, as a rule, referred to by his clan-name), the prevalent human lifespan then was about 100 years, which is relatively short. Hence, he saw the 4 sights once every 4 months. (BA 280)

7.1.1.4 However, as noted in the Commentary, the Dīgha-reciters say that he saw all the 4 sights on the same day. The 1st sight was seen while the Bodhisattva was sporting in the park in the bright of day (in the forenoon); the 2nd sight, as he was enjoying the delights of the park; the 3rd sight, while bathing in the

⁴¹⁶ In Greek mythology, the Muses (from the Proto-Indo-European root, *men-, to think) are the inspirational goddesses of literature, science, and the arts. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muses>.

⁴¹⁷ On the relationship between the 3 intoxications or pride (*mada*) and the 1st 3 signs, see SD 2.23 (2.2).

⁴¹⁸ On the 4 signs, see SD 49.8b (1.0.4.4-1.0.4.5).

⁴¹⁹ See SD 36.2 (5.9.2). On Vipassī Buddha, see **Mahā’padāna S D 14,2.1-14/2:21-29 + SD 49.8 (2)**.

auspicious lotus-lake (*maṅgala, pokkharāṇī*); and the 4th sight at sunset, as he was sitting on the auspicious stone-slab (*maṅgala, silā.tala*) dressing and adorning himself.⁴²⁰ We are to understand that the emotional impact of the long-lived or the short-lived bodhisattva, whether he saw the 4 sights a century apart or all on the same day (relative to the length of their respective lifespan) was the same—that of spiritual trauma (*saṁvega*) [1.3.1.2].

7.1.2 The sights in perspective

7.1.2.1 The fullest account of the 4 sights is given in **the Mahā'padāna Sutta** (D 14), not in connection with Siddhattha but the Bodhisattva Vipassī [2.5.1.3]. The very same details about Vipassī, however, apply to Siddhattha, too. The passages are here abridged but with all the relevant details intact (and meant to be read as a reflection), thus:

(1) THE OLD MAN (DECAY)

2.2 As prince Vipassī, bhikshus, was being driven through the pleasure garden, he saw **an old man**,⁴²¹ crooked as a curved rafter,⁴²² bent double, leaning on a stick, trembling as he went, wretched, youth long gone.

2.2.2 Having seen him, he addressed the charioteer:

'This man, good charioteer, what has he done? Neither his hair nor his body is like those of others!'

'He, sire, is called "old".'

'But, why, good charioteer, is he called "old"?''

'He is called "**old**," sire, because in no long time he will live no more.'

2.2.3 'What now, good charioteer, am I, too, subject to decay, not gone beyond decay?'

'You, sire, and I, and everyone else, too, are subject to *decay*, not gone beyond *decay*.'

2.2.4 'In that case, good charioteer, enough of this pleasure garden for today! Take me away from here back to the royal palace!'⁴²³

⁴²⁰ BA 280,16-19; J 1:59,32-34. A Chin text, **Wu-fen-lü** (fasc 2), says that when the Bodhisattva was only 14 years old, he went out through the eastern gate and saw an old person; out through the southern gate, a sick person; out through the western gate, a corpse (the west, the direction of the setting sun, is symbolically associated with death); and turning back, he saw the renunciant (T22.101b-2a). See Nakamura, 2000:95, 98 f.

⁴²¹ For a longer description of the old man here, see **Deva, dūta S** (M 130,5.2), SD 2.23.

⁴²² "Curved rafter," *gopānasī* (BHS id). We usu know rafters as being straight. The curved rafter is peculiar to Indian architecture, in ancient buildings (very likely wooden), such as depicted in the early Chaitya caves, such as Bhaja (or Bhaje, Pune, nr Lonavala, Maharashtra) or Karli (or Karla, btw Pune and Mumbai in southern Maharashtra, India). The beams were connected by "butt joints" (the simplest of joints) at the rafters forming great arches without either metal fittings or bonding agents. See Takeo Kamiya, "Lycian influence on Indian cave temples," http://www.kamit.jp/07_lycia/liko_eng.htm, accessed 10 Feb 2016.

⁴²³ *Ito va antepuram paccanittiyāhīti*. The *antepura* (Skt *antaḥpura*, lit "inner city"): (a) the royal palace (V 1:75,-19, 272,24-26; D 2:26,22; Sn 695; Ap 182,4); (b) the inner chambers of the palace, the harem (V 1:269,22, 2:184,14 = U 19,24; V 2:190,24, 4:159,5. Clearly "the royal palace" is meant here, if we are to understand that the Bodhisattva's intoxication with youth, health and life are abandoned with the signs of the old man, the sick man, and the dead man: see **Mada S** (A 3.39), SD 42.13. On account of the long intermission between the signs, it is possible that he might have fallen into a denial of the realities that confront him, and he resorts to the harem at this point in his life.

‘Yes, sire,’ replied the charioteer, bhikshus, in assent to prince Vipassī. Then, he took prince Vipassī back to the royal palace.

2.2.5 Prince Vipassī, bhikshus, returned to the royal palace, consumed by sorrow, depressed, thinking:

‘Shame indeed on this thing called “birth,” since **to one born, decay must show itself!**⁴²⁴

[The king asks about Vipassī and the charioteer recounts the event.]

REFRAIN: THE KING’S CONCERN⁴²⁵

2.4 [Be §46] Then, bhikshus, king Bandhuma said this:

‘Let not prince Vipassī forsake kingship!⁴²⁶ Let not prince Vipassī go forth from the house into homelessness! Let not the brahmin soothsayers’ word come true!’

2.4.2 Then, bhikshus, king Bandhuma furnished prince Vipassī with even more of the 5 cords of sense-pleasures—so that prince Vipassī *would not forsake kingship*, so that he *would not go forth from the house into homelessness*, so that the brahmin soothsayers’ word *would not come true*.

2.4.3 And so, bhikshus, prince Vipassī continued to enjoy the 5 cords of sensual pleasures, attended by them, fully endowed and engrossed with them.

(2) THE SICK MAN (DISEASE)

2.5 Now, bhikshus, with the passing of many years, many hundreds and many thousands of years, prince Vipassī addressed his charioteer:

‘Prepare some very fine carriages, good charioteer. Let’s go to the pleasure garden to see the grounds.’

‘Yes, sire,’ replied the charioteer, bhikshus, in assent to prince Vipassī.

2.5.2 Having prepared the very fine carriages, he announced to prince Vipassī:

‘Sire, the very fine chariots have been prepared. Please do now as you deem fit.’

2.5.3 Then, bhikshus, prince Vipassī mounted a fine carriage, and the carriages then headed for the pleasure garden. **[24]**

2.6 As prince Vipassī, bhikshus, was being driven through the pleasure garden, he saw a **sick man**⁴²⁷

afflicted, suffering and gravely ill,
lying fouled in his own excrement and urine,
lifted up by some and set down by others.

2.6.2 Having seen him, he addressed the charioteer:

‘This man, good charioteer, what has he done? Neither his hair nor his body is like those of others!’

‘He, sire, is called “sick”.’

‘But, why, good charioteer, is he called “sick”?’

‘He is called “**sick**,” sire. Perhaps, he may not recover from that sickness.⁴²⁸

2.6.3 ‘What now, good charioteer, am I, too, subject to sickness, not gone beyond sickness?’

‘You, sire, and I, and everyone else, too, are subject to *sickness*, not gone beyond *sickness*.’

⁴²⁴ *Dhi-r-atthu kira bho jāti nāma, yatra hi nāma jātassa jarā paññāyissatīti.*

⁴²⁵ Here, Be titles as “the sick man” (*byādhita, purisa*) [§§2.4-2.7].

⁴²⁶ *Mā h’eva kho vipassī kumāro na rajjam kāresi.*

⁴²⁷ On the description of the sick man here, see **Deva, dūta S** (M 130,6.2), SD 2.23.

⁴²⁸ *Eso kho deva vyādhito nāma app’eva nāma tamhā ābādhā vuṭṭhaheyyāti.*

2.6.4 *'In that case, good charioteer, enough of this pleasure garden for today. Take me away from here back to the royal palace!'*

'Yes, sire,' replied the charioteer, bhikshus, in assent to prince Vipassī. Then, he took prince Vipassī back to the royal palace.

2.6.5 *Prince Vipassī, bhikshus, returned to the royal palace, consumed by sorrow, depressed, thinking:*

*'Shame indeed on this thing called "birth," since **to one born, decay must show itself, disease must show itself!***⁴²⁹

REFRAIN:

The king asks about Vipassī; the charioteer recounts the event; and the king steps up his surveillance on Vipassī.

(3) THE CORPSE (DEATH)

2.9 *Now, bhikshus, with the passing of many years, many hundreds and many thousands of years, prince Vipassī addressed his charioteer:*

'Prepare some very fine carriages, good charioteer. Let's go to the pleasure garden to see the grounds.'

'Yes, sire,' replied the charioteer, bhikshus, in assent to prince Vipassī.

2.9.2 *Having prepared the very fine carriages, he announced to prince Vipassī:*

'Sire, the very fine chariots have been prepared. Please do now as you deem fit.'

2.9.3 *Then, bhikshus, prince Vipassī mounted a fine carriage, and the carriages then headed for the pleasure garden.*

2.10 *As prince Vipassī, bhikshus, was being driven through the pleasure garden, he saw a great gathering of people, dressed in cloths dyed in various hues, constructing a **bier**.*⁴³⁰

2.10.2 *Seeing them, he addressed the charioteer:*

'Why is there a great gathering of people, dressed in cloths dyed in various hues, constructing a litter?' [26]

*'It is because, sire, this is said to be "the dead".'*⁴³¹

'In that case, good charioteer, bring the chariot closer up to him who is dead.'

'Yes, sire,' replied the charioteer in assent to prince Vipassī.

2.10.3 *And prince Vipassī saw the dead, the one who has departed.*⁴³²

'But what, good charioteer, is "dead"?''

2.10.4 *He is called 'dead', sire, because now neither mother nor father nor relatives nor anyone else will see him ever again. He, too, would not see mother or father or relatives or anyone else ever again.*⁴³³

⁴²⁹ *Dhi-r-atthu kira bho jāti nāma, yatra hi nāma jātassa jarā paññāyissatīti.*

⁴³⁰ *Mahā,jana,kāyam sannipatitam nānā,rattānam ca dussānam vilātam* [Be Ce Ke Se so; Ee *milātam*] *kayiramānam*. Comy:Be reads *vilāta*, which it glosses with "litter" (*sivika*, DA:Be 2:47). *Sivika* (Skt *śivika*) has the sense of "litter" (by which the dead is carried), "bier" (on which it is cremated). A wordplay is evident here to highlight Vipassī being naive about death, seeing it for the first time. The word *milāta* means "faded," found only in comys, eg MA 2:50, describing the emaciated Bodhisattva's complexion; ItA 2:76, which explains *milāyanti* (pl of *milāyati*, "to become faded"). This reading, however, does not fit the context.

⁴³¹ *Eso kho deva kāla,kato nāmāti*, alt tr, "He, sire, is called 'dead'." There is "person" mentioned here, as in the other 4 portents. What is apparently highlighted is not a *person*, but a state or condition, "the dead" (*eso kāla,-kato*).

⁴³² *Addasā kho bhikkhave vipassī kumāro petam kālaṅkatham.*

⁴³³ On the description of the dead man here, see also **Deva,dūta S** (M 130,8.2), SD 2.23.

2.10.5 ‘What now, good charioteer, am I, too, subject to death, not gone beyond death: I will not see them ever again?’⁴³⁴

The king and the queen, too, and relatives, and everyone else, too, will not see me ever again—I, too, will see neither the king nor the queen, nor relatives, nor anyone else ever again?’⁴³⁵

‘You, sire, and I, are *all subject to death, not gone beyond death, and everyone else, too, is subject to death, not gone beyond death.*’

The king and the queen, and relatives, and everyone else, too, will not see me ever again—I, too, will see neither the king nor the queen, nor relatives, nor anyone else ever again.’

2.10.6 ‘In that case, good charioteer, enough of this pleasure garden for today. Take me away from here back to the royal palace!’

‘Yes, sire,’ replied the charioteer, bhikshus, in assent to prince Vipassī. Then, he took prince Vipassī back to the royal palace.

2.10.7 Prince Vipassī, bhikshus, returned to the royal palace, consumed by sorrow, depressed, thinking:

‘Shame indeed on this thing called “birth,” since **to one born, decay must show itself, disease must show itself, death must show itself!**’⁴³⁶

REFRAIN:

The king asks about Vipassī; the charioteer recounts the event; and the king steps up his surveillance on Vipassī.

(4) THE RENUNCIANT (LIBERATION)

2.13 Now, bhikshus, with the passing of many years, many hundreds and many thousands of years, prince Vipassī addressed his charioteer:

‘Prepare some very fine carriages, good charioteer. Let’s go to the pleasure garden to see the grounds.’

‘Yes, sire,’ replied the charioteer, bhikshus, in assent to prince Vipassī.

2.13.2 Having prepared the very fine carriages, he announced to prince Vipassī:

‘Sire, the very fine chariots have been prepared. Please do now as you deem fit.’

2.13.3 Then, bhikshus, prince Vipassī mounted a fine carriage, and the carriages then headed for the pleasure garden.

2.14 As prince Vipassī, bhikshus, was being driven through the pleasure garden, he saw a shaven-headed man, **a renunciant wearing the saffron robe.**⁴³⁷

2.14.2 Seeing him, bhikshus, prince Vipassī addressed the charioteer:

‘This man, good charioteer, what has he done? His head is unlike those of others; his clothing is unlike those of others!’

‘He, sire, is called a “**renunciant**” (*pabbajita*).’

2.14.3 ‘But, good charioteer, *what* is this that is called “renunciant”?’⁴³⁸

⁴³⁴ *Kim pana samma sārathi aham pi maraṇa, dhammo maraṇam anatīto’ti.*

⁴³⁵ *Mam pi na dakkhinti devo pi devī pi vā aññe cā ñāti, sālohita, aham pi na dakkhissāmi devam vā devim vā aññe vā ñāti, sālohite’ti.*

⁴³⁶ *Dhi-r-atthu kira bho jāti nāma, yatra hi nāma jātassa jarā paññāyissati, vyādhi paññāyissati, maraṇam paññāyissatīti.*

⁴³⁷ *Purisam bhaṇḍum pabbajitam kāsāya, vasanam.* The word “saffron” is a convenient blanket term. The word **kāsāya** (or *kāsāva*) (Skt *kāśāya* or *kaśāya*), in terms of monastic robes (*cīvara*), refers to cloth, traditionally made from cast-off rags (*paṃsukūla*, lit “dust-heap”), and “dyed” to a reddish-brown or brownish-yellow saffron colour or ochre tone. This gives a mixed or muddied colour, not a pure primary colour; hence, impure. Such a hue is to evoke an idea of impermanence and sense of detachment towards clothing, and more broadly, towards the world.

‘He is called a renunciant, sire, good in living in truth [Dharma-faring], good in living in harmony, good in doing the wholesome, good in being non-violent, good in being compassionate to all beings.’⁴³⁹

2.14.4 ‘Good indeed, good charioteer, is this one called renunciant! Good [29] is living in truth! Good is living in harmony! Good is living doing the wholesome! Good is being non-violent! Good is being compassionate to all beings!’⁴⁴⁰

2.14.5 That being the case, good charioteer, bring the chariot closer up to the renunciant!’⁴⁴¹
Then, bhikshus, prince Vipassī said this to the renunciant:

‘Now, good sir, what have you done? *Your head is unlike those of others; your clothing is unlike those of others!*’

‘I, sire, am called a “**renunciant**”.’

2.14.6 ‘But, good sir, *what* makes you a “renunciant”?’

‘I am called a renunciant, sire, *good in living in truth [Dharma-faring], good in living in harmony, good in doing what is wholesome, good in being non-violent, good in being compassionate to all beings.*’

2.14.7 ‘Good indeed, good sir, that you are a renunciant! *Good is living in truth! Good is living in harmony! Good is living doing what is wholesome! Good is being non-violent! Good is being compassionate to all beings!*’⁴⁴²
(D 14,2.1-2.14), SD 49.8

Note the interesting difference in the Bodhisattva’s response to the 4th sight. He actually went up to the renunciant and spoke with him by way of confirming what the charioteer had said.

7.1.2.2 The (Majjhima) Deva,dūta Sutta (M 130) gives a list of 5 divine messengers—those of (1) a young tender infant (birth), (2) an old person (decay), (3) a sick person (disease), (4) a criminal being tortured (karma), and (5) a corpse (death). These “divine messengers” [7.2.1.1] are mentioned by king Yama to the karmic beings brought before him in hell before undergoing their hellish tortures.⁴⁴³

Yama, in reality, is counselling these hell-beings (representing *us*), that they (we) should have learned from any of these 5 sights that life is based on time and deed. Whatever we do will catch up with us in a matter of time. Hence, the theme is different from that of the 4 sights presented in **the Mahā’padāna Sutta** (D 14) [7.1.2.1]—but the messengers are addressing us here and now, all the same—that we should heed them before it is too late! This is the true power of Buddhist spiritual myth.

7.1.3 Emotional trauma and its cure

7.1.3.1 Siddhattha reacted to the 4 sights with **emotional trauma**, a sense of spiritual urgency (*samvega*) because all that he was used to and taken for granted—youth, health and life—were suddenly falsified by the first 3 sights of an aged person, a diseased person and a corpse. The huge balloons of the pleasures of youth, health and life suddenly exploded right before him, pricked by the pin of impermanence. The ground of pleasure on which he stood and lived daily was suddenly pulled away, as it were.

⁴³⁸ *Kim pan’eso samma sārathi pabbajito nāmāti.*

⁴³⁹ *Eso kho deva pabbajito nāma sādhu dhamma, cariyā sādhu sama, cariyā sādhu kusala, kiriyā sādhu puñña, - kiriyā sādhu avihimsā sādhu bhūtānukampāti.*

⁴⁴⁰ *Sādhu kho so samma sārathi pabbajito nāma sādhu dhamma, cariyā [Ee sādhu hi samma sārathi dhamma, - cariyā] sādhu sama, cariyā sādhu kusala, kiriyā sādhu puñña, kiriyā sādhu avihimsā sādhu bhūtānukampāti.*

⁴⁴¹ *Tena hi samma sārathi yena so pabbajito tena ratham pesehīti.*

⁴⁴² On the 4th sign, see (1.0.4.5).

⁴⁴³ M 130,4-8/3:179-182 (SD 2.23).

When we see our life in terms of what we **have**, and then to lose all that we have, what are we? We are left with a dark cold void of fear and doubt. To think in terms of “having” something, even “owning” others (people, animals or beings), is based on the lack of understanding that “**nothing is worth clinging to,**” there is nothing in this world that is really ours, except our karma, our actions and their fruits.⁴⁴⁴

7.1.3.2 Siddhattha, 29 years 10 montha old [8.2.1.1],⁴⁴⁵ was traumatized by the first 3 sights—an old person, a sick person and a corpse [71.1.4]—because he suddenly realized that he would lose everything that he had (his loved ones, his women, his wealth, his realm), even all that he was: *his youth, his health, his life*. This was his experience of **atam,mayatā** (“not-my-ness”)⁴⁴⁶—not identifying with anything in this world; but not understanding this powerful truth, he was deeply shaken. This spiritual shock or existential trauma is called **samvega**, a sense of religious urgency.⁴⁴⁷

Recalling this earth-shaking event, the Buddha, in **the (Dasaka) Sa,citta Sutta** (A 10.51), describes himself as desiring to flee from worldly life like a man “whose clothes or head are on fire,” and to seek to put out this fire.⁴⁴⁸ The great renunciation was a dramatic result of a “loss of identity” (*atammayatā*).

The usual sense of **atammayatā** is that of having nothing to do with the world—Siddhattha had seen through the deceit and dangers of worldliness—of decay, disease and death. He found himself having nothing to do with the world but he simply could neither understand nor accept it. He had to go forth to seek this understanding. [16.3.4.2]

7.1.3.3 Siddhattha’s desire to go forth, to renounce the world, in quest of understanding this troubling world, is motivated by **the 4th sight**—that of the renunciant. At first sight, he could not understand what this person was, except to sense that he exuded “joyful faith and hope” (*pasāda*). It is a word that reflects the wholesome effects, especially joy, of a profoundly liberating faith in what is seen as an “opening” or “spaciousness” (*okāsa*) in a “crowded” or “confined” situation, a way out of the suffering world.⁴⁴⁹ Clearly, it is here the opposite of spiritual trauma, *samvega*.

⁴⁴⁴ *Sabbe dhammā nālaṃ abhinivesāyāti* (lit, “all things are not worthy of adhering to”) (A 7.58,11.2) + SD 4.11 (5). “All things” here refer to the 5 aggregates, the 12 sense-bases and the 18 elements, all of which are not fit to be clung to. These factors have to do with insight (*vipassanā*) (AA 4:43). This is part of “the brief advice on liberation through the destruction of craving”: **Cūḷa Taṇhā,saṅkhaya S** (M 37,2-3/1:251), SD 54.8; **Avijjā Pahāna S 2** (A 35.80,-6/4:88,11-15), SD 16.9. See SD 4.11 (6).

⁴⁴⁵ Traditional dates of the Buddha are 624-544 BCE (Sri Lanka) or 623-543 (SE Asia); Western scholars’ dates: 566-466 or 563-463. The general consensus amongst scholars is that the Buddha died between 410 and 400 BCE. (see Oxford Dict of Buddhism, 2003 sv Date of the Buddha). The Bodhisattva departed from Kapilavatthu on the full-moon of Āsāḷha (June-July), when he was 20, ie, 594 BCE (traditional). See **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,5.27.4), SD 9; Skt **Mahā,parinirvāṇa Sūtra** 40, 49 (ed E Waldschmidt, *Das Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1950-51:376). For Chin sources, see Nakamura 2000:418 n 68.

⁴⁴⁶ See **Atam,mayatā**, SD 19.13.

⁴⁴⁷ On **samvega**, see SD 9 (7.6).

⁴⁴⁸ *Seyyathā’pi āvuso āditta’celo vā āditta,sīso vā tass’eva celassa vā sīsassa vā nibbāpanāya adhimattarī*: see **(Dasaka) Sa,citta S** (A 10.51,4.2), SD 5.13. This is a popular parable in the Aṅguttara, evoking the urgency of self-review and meditation: **Samādhi S 2** (A 4.93/2:93), SD 95.8; **Maraṇa-s-sati S 2** (A 6.20/3:307, 308); **Maraṇa-s-sati S 2** (A 8.74/:320 f), SD 48.6; **(Satthā) Sa,citta S** (A 10.51,4.2/5:93), SD 5.13; **(Sa,citta) Sariputta S** (A 10.51/5:95) = A 10.51; **Samatha S** (A 10.54/5:99 f), SD 83.8; **Parihāna S** (A 10.5,7.2/5:103+8.2/5:105), SD 43.5. The blazing head (*āditta,sīsa*) parable is mentioned in connection with working at the goal of renunciation, in Comys (MA 1:95; SA 1:48; ThaA 1:112; PmA 1:261). **Jātaka Nidāna** records a related simile parable of the burning house, as the Bodhisattva reflects on his life, “The threefold existence (the sense-world, the form world, and the formless world) appeared to be like a burning house” (*tayo bhavā āditta,geha,sadisā khāyimsu*) (J 1:61) [8.1.4.1].

⁴⁴⁹ See, eg, **Sambadh’okāsa S** (A 6.26), SD 15.6.

We are told by the Commentators that Siddhattha had his charioteer—called **Channa**—to explain to him what these sights were and their significance. As for the 4th sight, Channa apparently did not really know who or what a “renunciant” was. After all, he, as Siddhattha’s groom and charioteer, was surely a man of the world, too. This is where the observant devas—said to be from Suddh’āvāsa—who had been following the Bodhisattva’s progress in the world informed Channa about the renunciant.

The Buddha,vaṃsa Commentary reports this when the Bodhisattva asked Channa about the renunciant:

“The charioteer, owing to the absence of any trace whatever of being a buddha, did not know either a renunciant nor the special qualities of a renunciant. Nevertheless, through the power of the devas, said: ‘My lord, this is called one who has gone forth,’ and praised the special qualities of renunciation.” (BA 1:280,9-11)

7.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE 4 SIGHTS

7.2.1 Divine messengers

7.2.1.1 Why are the 4 sights called “**divine messengers**” (*deva, dūta*) in the myths? The Buddha,vaṃsa Commentary explains that the devas, realizing that the time for Siddhattha’s full self-awakening was near, prepared to show him the 4 sights. They instructed a young deva (*deva, putta*) to project the form of an aged person. Only the Bodhisattva and the charioteer saw him. The rest of the story is as told in **the Mahā’padāna Sutta**⁴⁵⁰ [7.1.2.1].

When the Bodhisattva went to the park again, the same young deva projected an image of a sick man with similar results as before—that is, Siddhattha asked Channa, who explained the sight to him; they turned back, and Suddhodana, on learning this, at once strengthened the guards. Again, on the third occasion, the young deva projected a form of a corpse; and on the fourth occasion, that of a renunciant. (BA 279 f)

It is vital to understand that the young deva, acting on the instructions of other devas, was merely incidental to the occasions of the 4 sights, but *not responsible* for them. It is like people working to put up structures and decorations for a national celebration—they are only putting up the signs of celebration, but not themselves originate the celebrations or were behind the event that is celebrated.

The 4 sights were simply *incidental* to Siddhattha’s preparation for renunciation leading to his awakening. The devas, apparently, were simply the “event managers” or “time-keepers,” announcing and coordinating the occasion. After all, it is the “nature of things” (*dhammatā*) that the Bodhisattva would renounce the world, and that he had done it before [10.3.4]. The devas were merely the “messengers,” not the message (the Dharma), which was the task of the Buddha himself.

7.2.1.2 The 4 sights are technically known as “**the 4 portents**” (*pubba, nimitta*): the seeing of these 4 portents will reveal to Siddhattha the true nature of life. A religious revelation is always problematic—we tend to read such occasions in the way we have been conditioned by our family, community, tribe or mass media. It is a *conditioned response*; hence, it does not reveal any universal truth, but some kind of special knowledge or power for the benefit of an individual or the tribe, or insidiously, the benefit of the world for the greater benefit and dominance of that tribe. This is a common pattern of how revelations work in the God-religions.

⁴⁵⁰ **Mahā,panāda J** (J 264/2:331): this is the Be Ce + BA 279 reading (prob wr); Be + J 1:59 reading is **Mahā’padāna S** (D 14, regarding the Buddha Vipassī (D 14,21.-2.14/2:21-29), SD 49.8a. The same details apply to Siddhattha, too.

7.2.2 Evaluations

7.2.2.1 If the Bodhisattva's father, Suddhodana, was being over-protective of him, then, we are likely to have a case of **the Rapunzel syndrome**.⁴⁵¹ Rapunzel⁴⁵² is the child in us, who is yet to know the ways of the world. The witch is an authority figure in our family, society or religion, who wants to cast us in its own image. We are thus imprisoned in a tower of over-protectiveness, which ironically cannot totally or forever prevent our inner maturation. Given the right conditions, Rapunzel will break out of the tower, even break it down if necessary. Otherwise, she will die unborn in the tower.

The youth Siddhattha's father, Suddhodana, built for him the 3 mansions [6.1.2.4] as a palatial cocoon of pleasure, in a similar way as in the case of the youth Yasa.⁴⁵³ The effect of such a "flooding" process⁴⁵⁴ must have surfeited the youth with sensuality, so that he is traumatized by an opposite experience when he saw the 4 sights in quick succession on the same day⁴⁵⁵ [8.3.4.2].

As a young girl, **Paṭācārā**, too, was shielded from the world by her father, who kept her away from the world on the top floor of a 7-storey building throughout her adolescence. The result of such over-protectiveness was totally disastrous. In the end it destroyed the whole family, except, thankfully, Paṭācārā.⁴⁵⁶

7.2.2.2 For a better understanding, we can apply three related ideas here, that is, the Hegelian dialectic reasoning (thesis-antithesis-synthesis).⁴⁵⁷ This is simply a logical explanation rather than any kind of attempt at philosophical analysis. The **thesis** is that the 4 sights will lead to Siddhattha's renunciation; the **antithesis** is Suddhodana's efforts to prevent Siddhattha from seeing the 4 sights. The **synthesis** is that these two opposing factors lead to a common explosive revelation, an epiphany [4.4.3.3] for Siddhattha.

Suddhodana, in endeavouring to prevent his son, Siddhattha, from seeing the 4 sights, actually transformed them into a powerfully shocking revelation, when Siddhattha actually saw the 4 sights *as epiphanies* at a mentally mature age of 29.⁴⁵⁸ What Suddhodana attempted to shield from his son, he saw with the "inner eye" of intuition for the first time or, as if for the first time—with ground-shaking consequences.

7.2.3 An epiphany (from the ancient Greek, ἐπιφάνεια, *epiphaneia*, "manifestation, striking appearance") is an experience of sudden and striking realization. Generally, the term is used to describe scientific breakthrough, and also religious or philosophical discoveries, but it can apply in any kind of "Eureka!" situation,⁴⁵⁹ that is, where we gain insight into a problem or situation, giving it a new or deeper perspective.

⁴⁵¹ "Rapunzel" (KHM 12) is a German fairy tale in the collection assembled by the Brothers Grimm, first published in 1812 as part of Jakob & Wilhelm Grimm, [Kinder- und Hausmärchen](#) (Eng tr Margaret R Hunt, [Household Tales](#), 1884). The Grimm tale is itself an adaptation of an older story handed down from other sources.

⁴⁵² For the story and reflection, see SD 40a.8 (5.3.2).

⁴⁵³ Yasa's story, SD 11.2 (7).

⁴⁵⁴ "Flooding," see SD 43.2 (2).

⁴⁵⁵ See **Sukhumāla S** (A 3.38), SD 63.7; BA 2 f. Cf **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26) + SD 1.11 (1), where this is not mentioned.

⁴⁵⁶ See **Paṭācārā**, SD 43.3.

⁴⁵⁷ Based on the philosophy of German philosopher, G W F Hegel (1770-1831): "Review of *Aenesidemus*" ("*Rezen-sion des Aenesidemus*," *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* (German), 11-12 Feb 1794); tr Daniel Breazeale, *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*. Cornell University Press, 1993:63.

⁴⁵⁸ **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,5.27.4), SD 9.

⁴⁵⁹ **Eureka** (Gk Εύρηκα, "I've found it!") is an interjection expressing the joy of a discovery or invention. It is a transliteration of an exclamation attr to the ancient Greek mathematician and inventor Archimedes of Syracuse (c287-c212 BCE), who discovered the basis of specific gravity.

Epiphanies have been studied by psychologists⁴⁶⁰ and other scholars, particularly those attempting to study the process of scientific innovation.⁴⁶¹

The word epiphany originally referred to insight through divine intervention, that is, a supernatural revelation.⁴⁶² It is regarded as supernatural in the sense that the discovery or realization seems to come abruptly, as if, from the outside.⁴⁶³ Indeed, in the Buddhist myth of the 4 sights, the devas were the “innovators” of the 4 visions, and Siddhattha seemed to see them, as if for the first time.

7.2.4 Looking and seeing

7.2.4.1 On a psychological level, we can see Suddhodana’s efforts to prevent Siddhattha from seeing the 4 sights and encouraging him to indulge in sensual pleasures was effectively an attempt at preventing his son from growing up. Surely, despite all his father’s efforts at covering life’s painful realities, Siddhattha was precocious, intelligent enough at least, to notice that his peers or other children growing up in his midst; that he felt hunger and other pains in himself or in those near him; and that he must have at least seen birds or beast get killed or die [18.3.2.5]. Surely, during his 29 years, he should have noticed his father Suddhodana, and foster-mother, Mahā, pajāpatī, age or fall sick.

Anyway, all such events must have occurred “naturally,” that is, in such a mundane way that he was not really troubled by them. Perhaps, the maturing Siddhattha did notice such occurrences of decay, disease and death, but he was quickly distracted by his parents and peers and the pleasures awaiting him.

7.2.4.2 The seeing of the 4 sights, then, was epiphanous in the sense of being the “last pieces” in this mystery of life for the spiritually precocious Siddhattha. However, there can be no “last” pieces without preceding pieces. In short, he was experiencing the cumulative effects of conditioned existence, whose patterns he realized were so familiar as to be seriously troubling. The conditioning of seeing took time, but its conclusion appeared suddenly, as it were—a sort of dark “Eureka!” moment [7.2.3].

7.2.4.3 An unusual relief from the Peshawar Museum (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan) depicts the newly married Bodhisattva and his wife observing birth, an old man, a sick man and a corpse.⁴⁶⁴ We may conclude from such a state of affairs that the Bodhisattva “did not abandon his wife when he renounced the world, but that his act was based on a mutual understanding between them.” (Nakamura 2000:98 f)

7.2.5 From the prediction of the 7 brahmin soothsayers [2.6], and especially Koṇḍañña’s certainty that Siddhattha was destined to be the Buddha, we were given the impression that all was fated for Siddhattha. But it is not a fate preordained by any divine agency: the devas merely acted as “time-keepers” and celebrants of the stages of the evolution of the Bodhisattva towards awakening as the Buddha. [7.2.1.1]

⁴⁶⁰ Arianna Jarvis, *Taking a break: Preliminary investigations into the psychology of epiphanies as discontinuous change experiences*. Univ of Massachusetts-Amherst, 1996; retrieved 2 Dec 2017. M McDonald, “The nature of epiphanic experience,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 48,1, 2008:89-115 doi:10.1177/0022167807311878; retrieved 3 Dec 2017.

⁴⁶¹ Scott Berkun, *The Myths of Innovation*, O’Reilly Media, Inc. 2010:4, 8-10. Leeming, Madden & Marlan, *Encyclopedia of psychology and religion*, Springer, 2009:287.

⁴⁶² V J Platt, *Facing the Gods. Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

⁴⁶³ Berkun op cit 5.

⁴⁶⁴ “The new married couple [the Bodhisattva and Rāhula, mātā] observing birth, old age, sickness and death in the human being” (Fidaullah Sehrai, *The Buddha Story in the Peshawar Museum*, Univ of Peshawar, 1991: pl 21).

The early Buddhists used the term “nature of things” (*dhammatā*) [2.7.4.3] for the miraculous events that attended the Bodhisattva’s life, and presaged that he would become the Buddha. This is an ancient traditional way, or even a mythical way, of saying that, just as all life evolves through “natural selection” and “survival of the fittest,” we can see the Buddha as arising from the natural selection of learning and helpful experiences favouring his individuation, and spiritually, he is the “fittest” of beings who is able to withstand and prosper despite the onslaughts of the world and Māra, the most insidious of existential predators.

7.2.6 Psychologically, fatalism, in the context of early Buddhist mythology, is the predicament of “not having a choice.” Siddhodana *had no choice*, but to work to prevent Siddhattha from seeing the 4 sights. Siddhattha, for his part, *had no choice*, but to react traumatically to his seeing of the 4 sights, and to renounce the world.

It is in the nature of the best of us to seek answers and solutions to challenges before us. It is in the “nature of things” that Buddhas would arise in the world because we are stymied and troubled by suffering at various levels—especially by existential unsatisfactoriness, which pervades all the worlds and the heavens, too.

To exist in any form or formless state—human, non-human or divine—is to be impermanent, to change, to die. It is illogical, meaningless and impossible—wishful thinking at best—to exist or live without change. Only in transcending existence and non-existence do we overcome death: this is nirvana.⁴⁶⁵

The Buddhas arise to tell us that there is a way out, and what that way to total freedom, to nirvana is. We only need to follow his instructions and walk the path of awakening.

8 The departure

8.1 PRELUDE TO THE GREAT DEPARTURE

8.1.1 The devas dress the Bodhisattva [The Bodhisattva’s divine investment]

8.1.1.1 When the Bodhisattva had seen all the 4 sights, he was certain that he would want to renounce the world on that very day. The Commentaries relate to us a couple of episodes before the night of the renunciation. **The first episode** is that of Sakra (lord of Tāvatiṃsa) and his devas furtively dressing up Siddhattha after his bath in the park. They decked him up in a divinely glorious manner, since it would be the last time he would ever dress as a worldly person.⁴⁶⁶

8.1.1.2 Being dressed by the gods and being dressed in heavenly raiments and adornments are clearly mythical symbolism. This marked a significant turning-point in Siddhattha’s life. Just as the wives of the 4 guardian kings dressed Māyā before she conceived the Bodhisattva [2.4.1.2], Sakra and his devas dressed Siddhattha before the great renunciation.

He would leave the world he was born into and where he had to live by the rules of others and ruled over crowds—crowds that will decay, fall sick and die. The next best state is the divine world, which had come to him, as it were, but only as a sign of his moving on to an even higher state of being. He would work to discover the path of self-liberation and then declare it to the world.

⁴⁶⁵ Further, see **Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta S 1** (U 8.1), SD 50a.1.

⁴⁶⁶ J 1:60,32-61,20; BA 280,17-26.

8.1.2 Rāhula's birth

8.1.2.1 At that time, Suddhodana, heard that Rāhula, mātā had given birth to a son. At once, he said, “Convey my congratulations (*tuṭṭhi*)⁴⁶⁷ to my son!” The Bodhisattva, however, upon hearing the news, uttered: “An impediment (*rāhula*) has arisen! A bond has arisen!” Suddhodana, on being told of this, instructed that his grandson should thenceforth be known as **Rāhula**.⁴⁶⁸

8.1.2.2 Rāhula's birth signifies both the fulfilment of Siddhattha's worldly task as a son and husband. Yet, that very fact made it more difficult and more painful for him to renounce the world. It was difficult to leave behind those he loved and knew, but now he had to leave behind one he loved but had not yet even known or seen. The call of truth was more compelling—he had seen too much of true reality—he must go forth to seek mastery over it.

He is like a king at war who loses his kingdom and family. He must escape rather than surrender himself to the enemy. As a seeker of the good, he would then raise a different kind of army and return to fight a different kind of war. He must not free only his family but all his citizens and everyone else caught in the ways and wiles of the world. [4.3.1]

He renounced the world not because he loved his family less but because he loved the world more, that his liberation would also liberate others. After all, he would either become a world ruler or a world teacher.

If we see Siddhattha as simply going in quest of answers to the questions that merely troubled him, then he must merely be one with personal problems seeking solutions for himself. But he had no troubled family; it was a wealthy and powerful family that was able to support itself and govern others. His problem was with neither his family nor his realm, but that he had to conquer a greater menace, which unconquered, would overwhelm not only his family and lands, but the whole world without any means of liberation. Indeed, without the awakening that he sought, nothing in this world—his parents, his wife, his child, his realm, his life—would be worthwhile: they were all in the grasp of a dark force that he could only defeat by the light of awakening and the power of freedom.

8.1.3 Kisā Gotamī

8.1.3.1 Kisā Gotamī⁴⁶⁹ was a kshatriya maiden of Kapila, vatthu. From her balcony, she saw Siddhattha in his chariot, riding to home, having just received the news that a son had been born to him [8.1.2]. Gotamī was delighted by the sight of Siddhattha, and exulted the famous *nibbutā, pada*.⁴⁷⁰

<i>Nibbutā nūna sā mātā</i>	Happily at peace is the mother,
<i>nibbutā nūna so pitā</i>	happily at peace is the father,
<i>nibbutā nūna sā nārī</i>	happily at peace is the woman,
<i>yassāyaṃ īdiso patīti</i>	who has such a one for a husband.

Siddhattha was pleased by the mention of the word *nibbuta*⁴⁷¹ [8.1.3.2] which to him meant freedom. As a mark of his gratitude, he sent her his necklace of pearls, worth 100,000. She accepted it gladly as a token of his love (J 1:60f; BA 232 f). She is referred to as a cousin of Siddhattha, his father's

⁴⁶⁷ This is a free tr: *tuṭṭhi* lit means “jubilation, elation.”

⁴⁶⁸ J 1:60,20-26; BA 280,26-32.

⁴⁶⁹ *Kisā* is an epithet meaning “lean.” Apparently, it must have referred to her at an earlier period, because she was not lean (*akisā*) any more (BA 280,33). This is Kisā Gotamī (2), who was different from Kisā Gotamī (1) who lost her only child, went mad and was healed by the Buddha: SD 43.2d.

⁴⁷⁰ This well-known verse is found at J 1:60; DhA 1:85; ApA 65; DhsA 34; Thūpv 165 (v57); Upjal 127.

⁴⁷¹ On *nibbuta*, see SD 50.13 (1.3.1.2).

brother's daughter (*pitucchā, dhītā*).⁴⁷² The **Mahāvastu** parallel calls her Mṛgī, the mother of Ānanda. The Tibetan version says that she became the Bodhisattva's wife 7 days before the renunciation.⁴⁷³

8.1.3.2 The Kisā Gotamī episode shows that Siddhattha was a remarkably attractive man, especially to the women. But more so, this episode attests to Siddhattha's insight into life that would, in due course, blossom into Buddhahood. Siddhattha, hearing the voice of the world—quivering with lust, hate and delusion—is able to hear the subtler voice of ultimate reality.⁴⁷⁴

Kisā Gotamī had used the word *nibbuta* [8.1.3.1] in a worldly sense of being fully settled and satisfied when a parent or a partner was able to have Siddhattha related by marriage to them. She saw him as a sexual being, whose seeds would flower and fruit richly and thickly on the family tree, the proliferator of a generation of worthy nobles and scions. This was Siddhattha's potential for becoming the "world-monarch."

Siddhattha, however, heard the voice of the Dharma in the very same word *nibbuta*, which, to him, means "extinguished, cooled"—as of the fires that fuel decay, disease and death. When these fires were extinguished and cooled, then, there is true and lasting happiness. His mind was clearly set on the quest of what would not decay, would not become diseased, would not die—his was the noble quest (*ariya, -pariyesanā*).⁴⁷⁵ The Bodhisattva's sentiments at this point are succinctly captured in this verse from **the (Sutta Nipāta) Pabbajjā Sutta** (Sn 3.1):

This house-life is a crowd. ⁴⁷⁶	What a dusty realm it is!	
Going forth is the open:	seeing this, he went forth.	(Sn 406), SD 49.19

8.1.4 The dancing girls

8.1.4.1 The Bodhisattva returned to his mansion in great majesty, ascended it and lay on his royal couch. Almost at once, the women performers, well dressed and decked, skilled in dancing, singing and other arts, beguiling as heavenly nymphs, surrounded him. Some began playing various musical instruments; others began dancing, singing and entertaining him.

As the Bodhisattva's mind was detached from defilements, preoccupied with his visions of the 4 sights, he took no delight in any of the performances. He fell asleep for a moment. Seeing that the person they were entertaining had fallen asleep, they all ended their various performances. Tired, they, too, fell asleep. The lamps continued burning on scented oil.

8.1.4.2 When it was utterly silent, the Bodhisattva woke up and sat cross-legged on his couch. He saw that the women performers had lain aside their musical instruments and were sleeping. Some of them were drooling, some with their bodies wet with saliva, some grinding their teeth, some talking in their sleep, some groaning, some with gaping mouths, and some with their clothes in disarray, even revealing their bodies.

8.1.4.3 Seeing these women, who were beautiful and graceful when awake, now in disarray sleeping like corpses, he felt all the more detached from sensual pleasures. The huge mansion that was decorated and designed to be like Sakra's heavenly abode appeared to him as a charnel-ground with corpses scat-

⁴⁷² Eg, DhA 1:70; DhsA 34.

⁴⁷³ See Thomas 1949:54.

⁴⁷⁴ On the languages of conventional truth (*sammuti sacca*) and of ultimate truth (*param'attha sacca*), see SD 2.6b (1); **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9) @ SD 7.14 (4.2).

⁴⁷⁵ See **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,5-14), SD 1.11.

⁴⁷⁶ See **Sambādh'okāsa S** (A 6.26), SD 15.6.

tered about. All the 3 worlds (the sense-world, the form-world and the formless world) seemed to him as a house consumed by fire. He uttered this udana: “Alas! Such affliction! Alas! Such crowdedness!” (*upadutaṃ vata bho upassaṭṭhaṃ vata bho*). His heart was greatly drawn towards renunciation.⁴⁷⁷ [7.1.3.2]

8.2 THE FAREWELL

8.2.1 Readyng the horse

8.2.1.1 It was **the full-moon day of Āsāḷha** [2.4.1], and the Bodhisattva was 29 years 10 months old [7.1.3.2]. He rose from his couch, resolving: “It is proper that I go forth this very day!” He went to the door and called out: “Is there anyone there?” Channa, who was reclining with his head propped against the door-jamb, replied: “Sire, it is I, Channa.”

“I wish to go forth on the great renunciation today! Get my horse ready!”

“Very well,” said Channa,

Taking the trappings for a horse, he went to the stable. There he saw the horse of state (*maṅgala-assa*), **Kaṇṭhaka** (“thorn”), standing in a pleasant spot beneath a silken canopy with jasmine flowers on it. Lamps with scented oil were burning.

Going up to Kaṇṭhaka, he said, “This is the very horse that I should saddle today.”

Even as he was being caparisoned, Kaṇṭhaka knew: “This caparisoning is very elaborate, quite unlike other days, such as visiting the parks for pleasure. Surely, my master wishes to go forth on his great renunciation today!”

Then, glad at heart, he neighed loudly. That sound would have been heard throughout the city, but the devas silenced it so that no one heard it.⁴⁷⁸

8.2.1.2 This is one of those mythic episodes in Buddhist literature that is dedicated to an animal, the Bodhisattva’s horse, **Kaṇṭhaka**. We have many such tales in the Jātaka collection, but the renunciation episode has both a historic and spiritual significance. The horse Kaṇṭhaka was the vehicle of the Bodhisattva in the first leg of his departure from the world. The horse expedited the start of the great renunciation. This makes Kaṇṭhaka a hero of sorts—an active participant in the Bodhisattva’s renunciation.

Since a horse could not *speak* (although they do in the Jātakas), Kaṇṭhaka could neigh—he sensed the significance of the event. Kaṇṭhaka acted as a link with the old world that Siddhattha was leaving behind. Kaṇṭhaka’s joy to be with his master was expressed by his *neigh*, but it is a worldly sound that would prematurely waken the world, which would then hinder the Bodhisattva’s progress.

The gods—playing the role of **Nemesis** (a kind of Greek counterpart of karma)—silenced the neigh so that it did not rouse the world. The world—certainly Siddhattha’s parents, wife and immediate family—would neither understand nor accept such a departure. Yet they were powerless to stop him because they see the world in a different light, and so were left to slumber on as the Bodhisattva actively strived towards his goal.

8.2.2 Farewell to wife and child

8.2.2.1 Having dismissed Channa, the Bodhisattva thought of seeing his newborn child Rāhula. Having gone up to Rāhula, mātā in her inner chamber, he gingerly opened the door. A lamp of scented oil was burning in the chamber. In the half-light, he could see Rāhula, mātā sleeping in her bed strewn with a measure (*ammaṇa*) of flowers such as the great jasmine and the Arabian jasmine (*sumana, mallikā*).

⁴⁷⁷ J 1:61,13-31; BA 6,4-6, 281,8-33.

⁴⁷⁸ J 1:61,31-63,11; BA 6,5-8, 281,33-282,8.

She was resting with her arm around her child. Standing on the threshold, the Bodhisattva looked towards Rāhula and thought, “If I moved the queen’s arm and take my son into my arms, she will wake up. That will prevent my journey. I will return after becoming buddha, after having awakened. Then, I will see him.” With such a poignant thought, he descended from the upper storey.⁴⁷⁹

8.2.2.2 According to the Jātaka Commentary, Rāhula was then only **7 days old**.⁴⁸⁰ This is an ironic coincidence. When Siddhadatta, too, was 7 days old, his mother departed. When Rāhula is only 7 days old, his father, in turn, departed, too. While Siddhattha’s mother, Mahā Māyā, headed for the *temporal* bliss of Tusita, Siddhattha headed for the *eternal* bliss of nirvana.

This episode highlights one of the tenderest human moments in the Bodhisattva’s miraculous life. It is common that fathers often have to venture away from the family and loved ones to seek their fortune and provide for the family. Here, Siddhattha must leave his loved ones on an even greater quest.

8.2.2.3 We would be seriously mistaken if we think that Siddhattha was simply abandoning his family because he feared decay, disease and death. The point is that being just as he was in his palace, he suffered none of these 3 great evils: he was truly enjoying his life and everything else.

It is the realization that he would lose all that he *had* and all that he *was*—that he would lose all the world [1.3.1.1]—to decay, disease and death that utterly shook him into **spiritual trauma** (*saṃvega*). He is the epic hero who must leave behind all that he loves, all that he has, his very world, to overcome the demons that were insidiously ravaging his world. In a sense—at this time, before his awakening—we may say that Siddhattha was seeking to be in full control of his world, not to lose any of them. He left on his quest out of a greater love than for himself alone.

His quest in emulation of the 4th sight—as a renunciant—is the greatest love that any human or god can show all beings, all the world: that he would live for them: he would spend his precious life to discover the true nature of *decay, disease and death* and be free of them.

What the Bodhisattva would discover in due course was something far, far better than “eternal life”—he discovered the death-free. In this sense, the Bodhisattva is the greatest of religious heroes in that **he did not die for us, but he lived for us**. Hence, he silently declares: “I will return after becoming buddha!”

8.2.3 Kanthaka

8.2.3.1 Having come down from the upper storey of his mansion, the Bodhisattva went up to his horse, and said: “My good Kanṭhaka, today bring me across this dark night, and I will, with your help, become buddha. I will then bring this world with its gods across, too.”

Then, he leapt onto Kanṭhaka’s back. Kanṭhaka was 18 cubits⁴⁸¹ in length, and of proportionate height. Beautiful, swift and strong, he was as white as polished conch. If he were to neigh or kick the earth with his heels, its sound would be heard throughout the city. For that reason, the devas, by their supernatural powers, muffled his neighing, and each placed his palm under his hooves at each step. These were an amazing feat of which only the gods are capable in such a dramatic moment.

The Bodhisattva, riding Kanṭhaka, with Channa clinging on to his tail, reached the city-gate at midnight. Siddhodana had made the gate so strong and immense that it needed a thousand men to open

⁴⁷⁹ J 1:62,12-22; BA 282,9-282,17.

⁴⁸⁰ J 1:62,21.

⁴⁸¹ See “cubit” [6.2.1.3 n]. If we take the cubit here as about a forearm’s length, Kanṭhaka would be some 8.1 m (25.6 ft) long! It is more likely that the span (*vidatthi*)—the distance between the tips of the thumb and little finger stretched wide (23 cm = 8 ins)—which meant that Kanṭhaka is about 4.1 m (13.5 ft) long, which is more likely. We need, it seems, to discount the hyperbole of mythical numbers here.

each of its doors. This was to prevent the Bodhisattva from leaving the city. However, the Bodhisattva had the strength of “10,000 crores”⁴⁸² of elephants! In other words, he had herculean strength. No worldly door could stop him.

8.2.3.2 He thought, “If the door does not open by itself, I will, even as I am seated on Kaṇṭhaka’s back with Channa, holding on to the tail, press Kaṇṭhaka hard with my thighs and jump the rampart 18 cubits high [6.2.1.3] and depart!”

Channa, too, thought, “If the door does not open by itself, I will leap over the rampart with my master over my shoulder, and keeping Kaṇṭhaka under my armpit, holding him firmly around his belly with my right hand, and depart!” This is the departure of superhumans from the world.

And Kaṇṭhaka, too, thought, “If the door does not open by itself, I will carry my master upward, seated as he is on my back, with Channa holding on to my tail, and leap over the rampart and depart!” Even the Bodhisattva’s horse was of one mind on this momentous occasion that would change the course of humanity and all sentient life.

All three—the Bodhisattva, his groom and his horse—were all single-mindedly determined to go on the quest, and ready to surmount their very first obstacle. But the resident deva of the gate—as if of the same mind, too—deferently opened it.⁴⁸³

8.2.3.3 In this episode—the **great departure**—we see master, groom and horse thinking and working in unison as they leave the city of Kapilavattu. The conditions for the renunciation were beginning to unfold and take effect in a dramatic manner. The close bond between master and horse is well-known to those who love horses and animals.

The groom Channa, too, was the Bodhisattva’s personal companion and charioteer. In this poignant spiritual moment in the Bodhisattva’s life, these are the only two sentient beings, close to him, who accompany him in this first part of the great departure. Their loyalty and service to the Bodhisattva rewarded them with spending these last worldly moments with their common master, whose role would be soon changing.

The mythic hyperbole about the gate and its guards, and the Bodhisattva’s strength impress on us that there was nothing that could stop the Bodhisattva’s retreat from the world and advance on his noble quest. The Bodhisattva could himself, by his own power, have leapt over the rampart or any obstacle. But with the ripening of his good karma, the portal guardian, a deva, at once opened the gate for the start of the great quest. Indeed, the Bodhisattva’s good karma would keep on fruiting and guarding him all along his quest until he had freed himself from his karma with the attaining of buddhahood—but this was yet to come.

8.2.4 Sutta accounts of the renunciation

8.2.4.1 The Commentaries’ mythical account of the great renunciation tells us that Siddhattha stole away in **the dark of night** while the rest of his world was asleep. In a sense, this was a small awakening—Siddhattha realized how decay, disease and death gripped all that existed—which spurred him to seek the great awakening which would free him and the world from these 3 great evils. This vital truth must

⁴⁸² A crore (*koṭi*) is 10,000,000 (ten million). If we are not comfortable with the hyperbole here, we could scale down such numbers by a million (which would not be “gripping” enough for the ancient Indian audience). We are in the realm of mythic drama for an ancient worldly audience. We must also imagine that the ancient Indians, who invented the zero, did not have the exact awareness of large numbers as we do today, but spoke generously of astronomical numbers when dealing with the heroic and the religious.

⁴⁸³ J 1:62,22-63,17; BA 282,17-33.

be presented in all the drama that we, in our time, are used to: it is a drama that must outdo all other dramas—it is a cosmic drama. But the plain truth remained clear.

8.2.4.2 The suttas present to us the plain truth of **the great renunciation**. He is a mature 29-year-old when he renounces the world⁴⁸⁴ [7.1.3.2]. He leaves the world behind him in the “prime of life,” right before his grieving parents,⁴⁸⁵ as stated, for example, in **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26), that is, he renounces the world:

while still young,⁴⁸⁶ a black-haired young man endowed with the blessing of youth,
in the prime of life,⁴⁸⁷
though my mother and father wished otherwise and wept with tearful faces,
I shaved off my hair and beard, put on the saffron robe,
and went forth from the household life into the homeless life.⁴⁸⁸

(M 26,14/1:163), SD 1.11⁴⁸⁹

8.2.4.3 The Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta, however, omits both the account of his self-mortification⁴⁹⁰ and the details of the great renunciation. These are, however, found in the following texts:⁴⁹¹

Bhaya,bherava Sutta	M 4,20/1:21	SD 44.3
Mahā Sihanāda Sutta	M 12,44-61/1:77-83	SD 49.1, SD 1.13
Mahā Saccaka Sutta	M 36,12-44/1:242-249	SD 49.4, SD 1.12
Bodhi Rāja,kumāra Sutta	M 85,15-54/2:93 f	SD 55.2
Saṅgārava Sutta	M 100,9-41/2:211-213	SD 10.9

and, in part, recounted in the Vinaya (V 1:1-12), the Dīgha Nikāya (D 4,6 = 5,6; D 14, 16,5.27), the Aṅguta-tara Nikāya (A 3.39/1:145 f), the Udāna (U 1-3), and the Sutta Nipāta (Sn 72-74, 74-77, 77-78, 131-136).

⁴⁸⁴ Nakamura 2000:418 n68.

⁴⁸⁵ See SD 9 (7.6); also SD 19.13 (6.1.2).

⁴⁸⁶ Although *dahara* is often tr as “young boy,” it can also be rendered, as here, as “young.” Hence, we should not assume—as E J Thomas does—that the Bodhisattva renounced the world when “quite a boy” (1949:58).

⁴⁸⁷ “In the prime of life,” ie, the first of the 3 stages of life (*tiṇṇaṃ vayānaṃ paṭhama,vayena*, DA 1:253), ie, the 1st 30 years (MA 2:51 = AA 2:141). Presumably, the 3 stages of life are measured as follows: (1) youth (0-30), (2) middle age (40-70), and (3) senility (80-100+).

⁴⁸⁸ *Daharo va samāno susu kāla,keso bhadrana yobbanena samannāgato paṭhamena vayasā akāmakānaṃ mātā,-pitunnaṃ assu,mukhānaṃ rudantānaṃ kesa,massuṃ ohāretvā kāsāyāni vatthāni acchādetvā aḡārasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajim.*

⁴⁸⁹ This same statement is made mutatis mutandis by Soṇa,daṇḍa (**Soṇa,daṇḍa S**, D 4,6/1:115), SD 30.5, by Kūṭa,-danta (**Kūṭa,danta S**, D 5,7(4)/1:131), SD 22.8(7a), and by Caṅkī (**Caṅkī S**, M 95,9/2:167), SD 21.15, all of which say that he is “from a high family” (*uccā kulā*). Also at **D 36,13/1:240 = 85,11/1:93 = S 1.20,4/1:9**. A stock passage speaks of the Buddha as “the recluse Gotama, a Sakya son who went forth from the Sakya clan” (*samaṇo ... gotamo sakya,putto sakya,kulā pabbajito*): **Mv 22.2** (V 1:35); **D 4,2/1:111, 13,7/1:236; M 41,2/1:285; S 55,7.2/5:352; A 3.63,1/1:180; Sn p103**. For more refs: SD 51.15 (1.3.1.2).

⁴⁹⁰ See **Bhaya,bherava S** (M 4,20/1:20 f), SD 44.3; **Mahā Sīha,nāda S** (M 12,44-61/1:77-82), SD 49.1; **Mahā Sacca-ka S** (M 36,20-30/1:242-246), SD 49.4. Traditionally, ie, post-canonically, this period of the Bodhisattva’s experiment with self-torture methods lasted “6 years.” However, “[t]he Pali Canon does not, to my knowledge, indicate anywhere how long the future Buddha tried alternative methods. In the later literature [Buddhacarita, Lalitavistara, Mahavastu, J 1:67], however, it is often said that it lasted six years.” (Bronkhorst 1993:14 & n18).

⁴⁹¹ For a more detailed collation table, see SD 49.4 (Table 7).

8.2.4.4 How do we interpret the matter-of-fact **sutta version of the great renunciation**? Siddhattha leaves home “in the prime of life” (at 29), right before his weeping parents (and probably his wife and women, too). Did he have issues with his father or mother, or both? Was his marriage in shambles?

We can only fairly answer that we do not have any evidence for such speculation. It is also helpful for us not to project our own weaknesses and experiential biases—the problems that have shaped or squinted us—onto the Bodhisattva. Instead, we should present or interpret his life sensitively and wisely, according to the internal evidence of the suttas and commentaries.

8.3 SIDDHATTHA’S SPIRITUAL MATURATION

8.3.1 Psychological antecedents to the great renunciation

8.3.1.1 The simplest account of the great renunciation—as given in **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26) [8.2.4.2]—is probably the historical version of this key event in the Buddha’s life: he left home right before his grieving parents and family. However, this is about all we have of such a key event in Buddhist history. We have no more details as to how the Bodhisattva is able to leave home in broad daylight witnessed by his family. Of course, there is little or no mythical drama in such an account.

8.3.1.2 Let us put together the sutta records for a “historical” account of **the great renunciation**. The young Siddhattha is encapsulated by palatial wealth and royal security, and flooded with sensual pleasures and worldly distractions—all the initiatives of his father, Suddhodana. But this over-protectiveness, as we well know, can only effectively work up to the person’s adolescence. For various reasons, a healthy youth will break out of this protective shell to be his own person—otherwise, he would turn out to be a stunted sprout in the family tree’s dark shadows.

Perhaps, we must argue that there was no concept of “adolescence” in ancient India as we have it today. However, there was a parallel (but broader) concept, that is, “**the prime of life**” (*paṭhama vaya*), which encompassed the 1st 30 years of life [8.2.4.2 n]. Suffice to say that Siddhattha’s adolescence was what we today would see as a transitional period between puberty and adulthood. The transitional processes of adolescence comprise biological or bodily changes, emotional growth, cognitive development and social maturation. Of these, we can say that the psychological aspect—the cognitive transition in adolescence—is perhaps little different in the Buddha’s time from what it is today. [8.3.1.3]

Although the biological transition from childhood to adulthood tends to occur between 10 to 20 years of age, **the cognitive transition** is likely to extend over a longer period in the case of Siddhattha—say, between 10 to 30 years—on account of the over-protectiveness of his father. This makes good sense, as we have internal evidence showing that it is at the end of Siddhattha’s phase of cognitive transition that he renounces the world—when he is 29 [7.1.3.2.].

8.3.1.3 The psychological process that Siddhattha goes through from the ages of 10-30—from all that we know about him in the suttas and commentaries—can be described in terms of **cognitive transition**. This is a developmental period when the adolescent or young adult tends to think in ways that are more advanced, more efficient and generally more complex. We can see such developments in the young Siddhattha in a most dramatic way at this stage.

(1) First, during adolescence, Siddhattha was able **to better think about what is possible** instead of being limited to what is *real*, especially the virtual reality that his father was flooding him with. When he was younger, his thinking might have been limited to the here and now. For example, as a child, during the ploughing festival, he found himself alone, he naturally went into meditation [5.2.2.2].

However, when, as a youth, he saw the 4 sights [7], he considered them in terms of what was possible (he thought hypothetically): “You mean I will grow old, fall sick and die, too? And my beloved parents, my family, my companions, my son, and everyone else will grow old, fall sick and die, too? Then, what’s the point of being young, healthy, alive and prosperous? We are but a page to be turned in a samsaric volume.”

(2) A second change in Siddhattha’s adolescence was that he was now able **to think in more abstract terms**. He was more capable of thinking in abstract terms about interpersonal relationships, politics, religion and morality, and their ramifications. He was probably well aware, as an adolescent, that the rising kingdoms of Magadha and Kosala were no match for the relatively small borderland tribal republics, such as the Sakyas, the Koliyas and the Mallas. He probably valued friendship with his peers much more than having to fight battles with the rising armies and growing wealth of the kings of the central Gangetic plains. [2.2.1.11]

(3) Third, during adolescence, Siddhattha was likely to think more often about the process of thinking itself (or metacognition). He knows that he was able to show a growing introspection and self-consciousness, which seemed inherent in him as a spiritually precocious child. Like his modern counterparts, Siddhattha was probably also troubled by acute adolescent egocentrism—the notion that his father was constantly watching and evaluating him. He probably felt like a one-man-show on a large stage, with his father as his only audience watching him, waiting for him to take on the role of ruling his clan and country, even the world. [4.4.2]

(4) A fourth change in the adolescent Siddhattha was that he now tended to think multidimensionally, rather than being limited to a single issue. He was able to understand others, the adults, especially his dominating father, from multiple perspectives. He must have been able to read the signs of his times. As a childhood friend of Bimbisāra, he must have surely known of his royal friend’s plans to emulate the imperial success of the Persians (the Achaemenids), to control the Ganges river commerce, to tap and tax the sprawling fields of rice-paddy of Magadha, and to exploit the local natural resources, especially iron, for producing better tools, transport and weapons. [11.2.2.4]

He was able to read his father’s intentions, covert and overt. Yet, he was also tactful—a sign of maturity—when his father informed him that other Sakya fathers were not keen to offer their daughters to him because they perceived him as lacking martial skills. He obliged by volunteering to perform a feat of superhuman strength and skill in archery [6.2.1.2].

(5) Finally, the adolescent Siddhattha was more likely to grow out of the pre-adolescent tendency to view things in absolute “black and white” terms. He was more likely to **see things in relative and conditional manner**. He was more likely now to question, at least tacitly, his father’s actions, reasoning and motives. He was more likely to accept the relative “facts” that he saw for himself than the *absolute* “truths” his father tried to impose on him. In short, we are likely to see Siddhattha exasperating his father by asking a lot of difficult questions, and even offering his own irrefutable solutions.⁴⁹²

It is this last aspect that should interest us most at this point in the Bodhisattva’s life, and which we shall now examine more closely. [8.3.2]

⁴⁹² For “cognitive transition,” see Laurence Steinberg, “Adolescence,” in *The Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 2nd ed, 2001:12 f.

8.3.2 Philosophical antecedents to the great renunciation

8.3.2.1 The Mahāvastu, the earliest Sanskrit biography of the Buddha,⁴⁹³ contains some compelling and valuable details—mostly based on sutta teachings—on the nature of Siddhattha’s (Skt *siddhārtha*) philosophical prowess and arguments that eventually led to his renunciation of the world. In volume 2 of the Mahāvastu, we are told that Suddhodana, concerned with his son’s desire to go forth from the home life, sent an urgent message to 500 “kings” (*rāja*), that is, kshatriya chiefs or “rajahs,” to help discourage him from doing so. (Mvst 2:141)

8.3.2.2 The meetings between Siddhattha (the Bodhisattva) and his father, Suddhodana, and the 500 rajahs, might have taken a few sessions.⁴⁹⁴ Their number, however, was not as significant as what transpired therein, that is, **the questions or reassurances asked by Siddhattha** before those present, especially his father. In the 1st session or 1st set of questions, the youth (*kumara*, also “boy”) Siddhattha asked: “If there is assurance (*pratibhuko bhavati pratijānāmi*) on **4 points**, maharajah, I promise you that I will not leave this city.” Suddhodana at once agreed. Siddhattha then said:

“Now I am in my youth. Let old age never come to me!
Now I am in good health. Let sickness never come to me!
Now I am alive. Let death never come to me!
Now I revel in prosperity. Let adversity never come to me!”

The devas and the brahmas exulted at these statements. But Suddhodana, stung by the dart of suffering, full of tears, replied to the Bodhisattva:

“My son, you know yourself why this is not possible. Decay, disease, death and adversity are not within my powers (*na me gatih!*)” (Mvst 2:141 f)

8.3.2.3 The young Siddhattha then asked: “Come then, assure me on **3 points**.”

And Suddhodana agreed. Siddhattha asked:

“Let me, sir (*bhonto*), have all the divine pleasures. Let them be permanent! Assure me this!

Let the celestial nymphs (*apsarā*), in their fine anklets, ornaments and jewels, sweetly sing in the space around me!”

(The narrator parenthetically reminds us that the Bodhisattva did not have any desire for any of these, despite his words. His mind was already set on renouncing the world. In other words, these were merely rhetorical questions to impress on his father his great determination.)

Suddhodana sadly replied: “Be content, my son. For, your sensual pleasures are already enjoyable and pleasant.”

8.3.2.4 The young Siddhattha then asked, “Come then, O lord of the land (*mahī,pati*), I shall now turn to just **2 points**. Assure me of them, if you wish.”

And again his father agreed, saying: “Surely, I will earnestly assure you of these 2 points. Tell me what they are, and do not leave me!”

Siddhattha then said:

⁴⁹³ **Mahāvastu** (Mvst), “the great chapter,” or, fully, Mahāvastu Avadāna, the earliest Skt biography of the Buddha, a part of the Vinaya Piṭaka of the Lokottara, vāda (affiliated with the Mahāsaṅghika). Like the major Buddhist Skt works, it is heavily interpolated, parts of which may date as early as the 2nd cent BCE. Ed E Senart, 3 vols, Paris, 1882-1897, [GRETIL](#), 2005. Tr J J Jones, *The Mahāvastu*, 3 vols, London, 1949-1956. See SD 49.18 (1.1.4.7).

⁴⁹⁴ These sessions are all found in the ch on the 2nd account of the renunciation (Mvst 2:141-149), tr as “The great renunciation again” in J J Jones’ *The Mahāvastu* (Mvst:J 2:134-136). We have only given some relevant selected passages here,

“Assure me, O guardian of the land (*mahī,pāla*), of this that there will never arise in the notions of ‘I am the doer’ (*aham,kāra*) or ‘Mine is the doer’ (*mama,kāra*).⁴⁹⁵

Assure me that there will never be for me the notions of ‘great’ (*mahanta*) or ‘little’ (*alpa*)!”

The Maheśvara devas,⁴⁹⁶ standing in the sky, sang:

“Truly, you will become the self-awakened, the breaker of all bonds! And why do we say this? It is because there has been no such utterance before in the world of devas and humans of such words of wisdom that you have spoken!”

Sadly, yet again, Suddhodana tearfully replied:

“I do not even know these things that you mention, O highest of men (*puruṣōttama*). Hence, I cannot assure you of them!” (Mvst 1:142 f)

8.3.2.5 “Enough of this dallying (*alam cireṇa*)! Assure me of only 1 point, and I shall live on in delightful Kapila,vastu.”

Suddhodana at once agreed. Siddhattha then said:

“Even while I dwell in this fair and blessed worldly palace, let my heart be freed of all hindrances (*sarva,nīvaraṇāpagataṃ citterṃ me vartatām vaśat!*)”

Then, the devas and hosts of non-humans cried: “O, the Dharma! (*aho dharmam!*)”

The sad king, in a flood of tears, uttered: “I have no power over that!”

Then, the Bodhisattva declared his desire for his ultimate goal (*paramārthābhikāmkṣiṇo*) to the delight of the devas and humans, and addressed his father:

“O highest on earth, I shall go in quest of the death-free, the non-conditioned, that knows neither decay nor disease, free from disaster and fear! O rajah, I must find for myself what is permanent, happy, pure (*yan nityam yat sukham yac chubham*). There is no doubt of this. Hence, though you let me go, be of good courage.”⁴⁹⁷ (Mvst 2:143 f)

8.3.2.6 Suddhodana, realizing that Siddhattha was recalling his meditation under the jambul-tree [5.2.2.2], felt deeply anxious. Determined not to let Asita’s prediction come to pass, Suddhodana decided to provide more living quarters for his women and constructed more pleasure parks for his enjoyment. Suddhodana instructed the women to entertain Siddhattha with dance, music and song.

However, none of them—the women, the parks, the entertainments—brought any joy to Siddhattha. By his own effort, with care in his heart, he mastered all the conditions and became free from passion. Recalling the joy of his meditation under the jambul-tree, he went up to his upper chamber and entered deep meditation, as before.

8.3.2.7 Suddhodana still could not understand what was going on in Siddhattha’s mind. In due course, he asked him: “What is the meaning of all this?” Siddhattha replied:

“I have witnessed the affliction of the body. Health is followed by disease; life by death. An old man is but another dead man. All conditioned existence passes away. Like the seasons, they come and go.

Father, I see the decay of wealth. It is impermanent, passing on from one to another.

Yes, I see the danger of the enemy’s army, the dangers and fears, the cutting off of ears, hands and heads, and various parts of the limbs.”

⁴⁹⁵ See eg M 3:32,34, 36,30; S 2:275,2(29); A 4:53,9(13).

⁴⁹⁶ These gods are unknown outside of Mvst. The more usual gods here would be those of the pure abodes (*sud-dhāvāsa*), which this term prob refers to.

⁴⁹⁷ The last two sentences I follow J J Jones (Mvst:J 2:138).

“Enough, my son,” pleaded his father, “You are too tender, in the bloom of youth. Perform your rajah’s duties. Enjoy and amuse yourself. Think not of going forth as a recluse!”

“If you give me **8 boons**, father, then, I will no longer harbour this intention.”

“What are they?” Suddhodana asked.

“Grant me, father, these **8 boons**:

that old age does not overtake my youth;

that disease does not overtake my health;

that death does not overtake my life;

that I shall not lose your company;

that I do not lose any of the apsara-like women of my harem or my many kinsfolk;

that this realm does not have reversal in fortune or other vicissitudes;

that those beings that are born are free from death and from defilements; and

that for me there is an end of birth, decay and death.”

“My son,” replied Suddhodana, “Where do I get the power to grant you all these boons? Even those great ancient kings, those of the noble lineages, impermanence has overtaken them, leaving only their names.”

“If, father, you cannot grant me these 8 boons, then, I invite you to enjoy a state that is the end of decay and death.”

“I am old, advanced in years, past my youth. Just wait till I am dead before you leave home.”

“Rejoice father! If you live, you will again see my return released from rebirth, having cut off all craving and suffering, and realized the limbs of awakening (*bodhy-aṅga*).”⁴⁹⁸

8.3.3 Siddhattha, women and the world

8.3.3.1 Suddhodana then showed Siddhattha a crowd of young women, describing their beauty and abilities in various ways, such as playing the 5 kinds of musical instruments (*pañc’aṅgikā tūryāni*).⁴⁹⁹

“Delight in them, my son! Do not wish for the wanderer’s life.”

“Father,” replied Siddhattha, “When a man perceives a woman, he becomes excited, indulgent and intoxicated.”

“How do you perceive them?” asks Suddhodana.

“It is a perception of the perverted (*viparīta, samjñā*), father.”⁵⁰⁰

“What do you mean by ‘perverted’?”⁵⁰¹

“This body is fixed on coming and going, standing and sitting, being active and being quiet. As an external thing, it is void, inactive, whether strong or weak, it is an illusion, unreliable—this is all there is of the nature of the body (*sarvam eva dharma, kāyaṃ*).”⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁸ “Limbs of awakening” or “awakening-factors” (Skt *bodhy-aṅga*; P *bojjh’aṅga*), of which there are 7: (1) mindfulness, (2) dharma-investigation, (3) effort, (4) zest, (5) tranquility, (6) concentration, and (7) equanimity. This is, of course, an anachronism—Siddhattha only teaches the limbs of awakening when he is a Buddha. See **(Bojjhaṅga) Sīla S** (S 46.3) SD 10.15.

⁴⁹⁹ This may also refer to a musical instrument playing the Indian pentatonic scale.

⁵⁰⁰ Some modern readers may wonder if there is some element of homosexuality here. This is highly unlikely because there was no such notion in Indian society then, certainly not in the early suttas. There is social construct known as “homosexuality” then, only the idea of lust for bodies and sexual intercourse that is allowable or not, wholesome or not. See **Sexuality**, SD 31.7 (7).

⁵⁰¹ The suttas speak of the 3 perversions (*vipallāsa*)—those of perception (*saññā*~) of thought (*citta*~), and of view (*diṭṭhi*~): **Vipallāsa S** (A 4.49), SD 16.11. As a Bodhisattva, Siddhattha understandably does not have full knowledge of these yet.

8.3.3.2 Suddhodana then asked Siddhattha: “If you, son, delight not in beauty [form], what kind of woman [non-man] do you delight in? What is your view?”⁵⁰³

“Father, I view it as a samsaric dance, where consciousness is the machine (*yantra*) and feelings the actors making up the scenes.⁵⁰⁴ The 3 realms (the sense-world, the form world and the formless world) are the stage, the place, for beings to enter into the bonds of acting and reacting in a cycle of lust and love, deeply delighting on account of a hundred defilements.⁵⁰⁵ From time immemorial, beings have been conditioned and caught in this.

So, father, rejoice! For, I shall end this play of cyclic life. I shall enter the city of peace, nirvana, unassailed by decay and death. I shall follow the path of the past Tathagatas, arhats, fully self-awakened ones.”⁵⁰⁶

Suddhodana then reminded Siddhattha of his heaven-like mansions. Siddhattha replied that he found no pleasure in them. The body, after all, is like a serpent’s slough, to be shed.⁵⁰⁷ There is much danger (of defilements) in the mansions, as in the 3 worlds. If not for this, he would not have been keen on leaving home.

8.3.4 The 4 sights (Mahāvastu version)

8.3.4.1 As a last resort, Suddhodana decided to show him all the maidens in Kapilavastu and see whether Siddhattha showed an interest in any of them. The roads between the palace and the parks were all cleaned and decorated, made fragrant with incense and strewn with flowers. Dancers, mimes, athletes, wrestlers, minstrels and drummers livened up the way with pleasant sights, sounds and scents.

When Siddhattha traveled along these roads, he would see only what was pleasant and none of the 4 sights. Then, Siddhattha went to the park in great pomp and majesty, surrounded by servants and escorts all around him to ensure he saw no unpleasant sight.

8.3.4.2 While he was on his way, **Ghaṭikāra** the potter, a pure abode (Skt *śuddh’āvāsa*) non-returner brahma and other pure abode brahmas conjured up a **very aged man** (the Mahāvastu then describes him in the manner of the suttas) [7.1.2.1]. Siddhattha stopped his chariot and asked the charioteer about the sight, and the charioteer explained to him. Realizing the significance of his vision, Siddhattha turned back.

Suddhodana, upon learning of the fulfilment of Asita’s 1st prophecy, at once instructed the women in the Siddhattha’s mansion to entertain him in the best manner and in every way they could. But Siddhattha found no delight in them, his mind preoccupied with the significance of what he had seen. [7.1.2.1(1)]

On another day, he went into the park again, on the same road with all its decorations and all its festivities. This time Ghaṭikāra and the pure abode devas conjured up a **diseased man**—with the same

⁵⁰² In **Sabba S** (S 35.23), SD 7.3, the “all” (*sarva*; P *sabba*) refers to our 6 sense-faculties, their sense-objects and so on, ie, the totality of existential experience and source of knowledge.

⁵⁰³ *Yadi putra rūpeṇa na rajyasi kim idaṃ niṣpuruṣeṇa rajyasi kaṃ tvaṃ darśanam upalakṣyasi.*

⁵⁰⁴ *Tāta samāsāra, nāṭakam upalakṣayāmi yantra, vijñāna, naṭa, vedana, vikārām janayati.*

⁵⁰⁵ *Trai, dhātukaṃ raṅgaṃ sthānaṃ satvānām kṛta, vikṛti, saṅgatiṣu raṅgaṃ praviśati tṛṣṇā, sneha, varam ca kleśa, - śatānām gābhī, ratā.*

⁵⁰⁶ Cf **Nagara S** (S 12.65): “Even so, bhikshus, I have seen an ancient road, an ancient way, followed by fully self-awakened ones in the past. ... I followed it.” (*Evam eva khv-ahaṃ addasaṃ purānaṃ maggaṃ purāṇājasam pubba-kehi sammā, sambuddhehi anuyātaṃ ... taṃ anugacchīm*, S 12.65, 21.2+22/2:106), SD 14.2.

⁵⁰⁷ See **Uraga S** (Sn 1.1), SD 101.3.

result. His distraught father again instructed the women in the mansion to try to distract Siddhattha, but without any effect as before.⁵⁰⁸ [7.1.2.1(2)]

On the third day, in his outing to the park, Ghaṭikāra and the devas conjured up **a dead man**—with the same result. He returned to his mansion, and Suddhodana reacted in the same way to distract him with the women, but without any effect as before. [7.1.2.1(3)]

On his 4th outing to the park, Siddhattha saw **a renunciant** (Skt *pravrajita*), conjured up by Ghaṭikāra and the pure-abode devas. Unlike the previous 3 sights which the traumatized Siddhattha had seen, this last sight filled him with peace, joy and hope. [7.1.2.1(4)]

This time, he himself asked: “Noble one (*ārya*), what’s the purpose of your being a renunciant?”

“Son, it is for the sake of winning self-control, peace and final nirvana (*ātma,dama.śamatha,parinirvāṇārtham*).”

These words filled him with joy, and he declared:

“Indeed, this is a renunciant, distinguished by his flowing saffron cloth, crosses the crowded eastern pathway,⁵⁰⁹ his limbs covered in mud, dust and dirt. He is like a red goose⁵¹⁰ in a thicket of reeds!”

Siddhattha was now ready for the great renunciation. (Mvst 2:149-157)

8.3.5 Evaluation

8.3.5.1 The Mahāvastu passages we have included above [8.3.2-8.3.4] are valuable in providing helpful clues to the “missing years” that constituted the adolescence of Siddhattha Gotama, the Buddha-to-be. Although fictional, such accounts serve as authentic mythical lessons based on the sutta teachings and other precedents in the traditional accounts of the Buddha’s life.

8.3.5.2 Far more than merely “knowing” what the Bodhisattva did (often based on the time-limited studies and views of professional scholars, each with their biases and limitations), these passages allow us to **envision** the thoughts and **feel** the emotions—the human processes—of the Bodhisattva, as it were. We are not dissecting an ancient specimen here, but trying to relive authentic actions and teachings of the most evolved, the greatest, of spiritual teachers in our epoch.

8.3.5.3 Our task is to *see and know* the Buddha better. Such accounts give us that inner vision of the struggle, insights and awakening of the one who discovered and opened to us the noble eightfold path. Through a deeper understanding of the Buddha’s humanity, we better understand the nature of our own body and the workings of our mind.

We may call this the “**mythic link**,” a connection that is greater than all that we can learn from books or from listening to Buddhist talks—these are our own direct experiences of what the Buddha himself has experienced—his humanity and spirituality. The better we understand this, the closer our actions and non-actions bring us to awakening and freedom.

⁵⁰⁸ Mvst treats the 4 sights in great detail, and repeats all these details for every sight, as in the oral tradition. These passages have been summarized as the details are very close to those of the Pali texts given earlier.

⁵⁰⁹ “Main road,” *aindra,māрге*. *Aindra* (P *inda*) as an adj usually means “leader.” Mvst:J has “royal road.”

⁵¹⁰ *Cakra,vāka*, see Miln 401 f, which is a chapter highlighting its qualities.

9 The flight of the gods

9.1 DEVAS AND MĀRA

9.1.1 The devas

9.1.1.1 The Pali Commentaries inform us that the Bodhisattva left Kapilavatthu in total silence and darkness (except for the moonlight)—3 months before his 29th birthday [8.2.1.1]—unknown to his father and family, and the rest of the world. His only witnesses, who followed his departure, were his groom Channa, his horse Kaṇṭhaka, and **the devas**. These gods had momentarily forsaken the comforts and delights of their heavens as if to act as stage-managers and audience of this cosmic drama.

Apparently, the devas most actively involved in the Bodhisattva's progress at this early stage, were **Sakra and his host of the 33** (*tāva,tiṃsa*). They had worthily created this heaven for themselves, having previously lived and worked to create public conveniences (like levelling the roads, digging wells and growing trees for weary and needy travelers). Hence, theirs can be said to be a heaven for social workers and public volunteers. Their celestial lifespan was 2,000 celestial years (or 26 m human years).

The other devas (and their respective lifespans) included those from the heavens of **the 4 great kings** (*cātum,mahā,rājika*) (500 celestial years or 9 m human years); **the Yāma gods** (*yāma*) (8,000 celestial years or 144 m human years); **the contented gods** (*tusita*) (16,000 celestial years or 576m human years).⁵¹¹ The calculations of these devas' lifespans are given in **the (Tad-ah') Uposatha Sutta** (A 3.70), from which we get the following ratios for the lifespans of the 4 guardian kings, of the 33, Yāma, of the contented, of those who delight in creation, and of those who lord over the creations of others, thus:

celestial realm	1 celestial day (cd) =	celestial years (cy)	human years (hy)
6. Catum,mahā,rājika	50 hy	500 cy	9 m hy
5. Tāva,tiṃsa	100 hy	1,000 cy	36 m hy
4. Yāma	200 hy	2,000 cy	144 m hy
3. Tusita	400 hy	4,000 cy	576 m hy
2. Nimmāna,ratī	800 hy	8,000 cy	2,304 m hy
1. Para.nimitta,vasavattī	1,600 hy	16,000 cy	9,216 m hy

Table 9. Lifespans of the sense-world devas relative to earth time⁵¹² [18.3.3.1]

m = million

9.1.1.2 The point of this exercise [9.1.1.1] is to show that the devas of these 6 sense-world realms are very long-lived, very much longer than any earth-being, especially human beings. Since these are the sense-worlds (*kāma,loka*), they share the same cosmic cycle of evolution, existence, devolution and non-existence.⁵¹³ In short, they are contemporaneous with the earth. Not all the devas may have lived in the times of all the 4 buddhas, but understandably they share at least some knowledge of these buddhas from the common memories and accounts of past devas who had lived in the past buddha-epochs.⁵¹⁴

The devas of the sense-world—which includes earth—as a rule, have lived through the times of all the past 3 buddhas, and maybe some of the earlier buddhas, too. In our present world cycle, there are a

⁵¹¹ For a full list of the 31 realms of existence, see DEB: App 3 or SD 1.7 (App).

⁵¹² Nyanaponika & Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1999:17.

⁵¹³ On the world-cycles, see **Aggañña S** (D 27), SD 2.19 (8-10).

⁵¹⁴ For details of the past buddhas, see SD 49.8b (Table 1.0.4).

total of **5 buddhas**. Four of them have appeared, that is, Kakusanda, Koṇāgamana, Kassapa and the buddha of our epoch, Gotama; the future buddha, Metteyya, is yet to come.⁵¹⁵

However, only the devas were, on account of their long lives, familiar with the tradition or “protocol” of the arising of a buddha. Being aware of the remarkable goodness and wisdom of the buddhas, they are always keen to have a role in the advent of a buddha. Hence, we see them actively involved in the progress of the Bodhisattva.

9.1.2 Māra’s 1st appearance

9.1.2.1 Even as the Bodhisattva, assisted by the devas, was now outside the gates of Kapilavatthu, a dark force that is more powerful than the devas themselves appeared to stop him from his quest. This was **Māra the bad** (*māra pāpimā*), the true lord of the sentient world. If the world were a cosmic prison, then, Māra is its chief warden—his desire is to ensure that no being escapes from this world or samsara, the cycle of rebirths and redeaths. Siddhattha’s quest would eventually free himself from Māra’s grasp. Hence, Māra had to stop him.

Māra appeared in the sky above the Bodhisattva, intent on making him turn back, declaring: “Friend, do not depart! On the 7th day from today, the wheel of the empire will manifest to you. You will rule over the 4 great continents, each with their surrounding islands, numbering 2000. Turn back, O hero!”

“Who are you?” asked the Bodhisattva.

“I am Vasavatti (‘the wielder of power’).”

“Māra, I know full well of the wheel of the empire manifesting itself, but I have no use of sovereignty. I will become **buddha** (‘the awakened one’), causing the 10,000 world-systems to resound!”

Then, Māra gave the Bodhisattva an ominous warning:

“From now on, the moment any thought of lust, or hate, or violence, arises in your mind, I will know of it!”

9.1.2.2 For the next **7 years** (that is, the 1st year of renunciation plus the 6 years of self-mortification), Māra shadowed him closely, never away from his side, waiting for an opportunity to seize him, and thwart, even end, his quest.⁵¹⁶ **The Satta Vassa Sutta** (S 4.24), too, states that Māra stalks the Buddha for “7 years” (*satta vassa*), but these are the 6 years of the Bodhisattva’s self-mortification and the 1st year of the awakening.

In other words, Māra had been shadowing Siddhattha for these 7 years:

- (1) for a duration (probably a few months) during the 1st year of renunciation, beginning with his departure from Kapilavatthu, [8.2.3]
- (2) when the Bodhisattva lived as a lone itinerant monk outside Rājagaha, [11]
- (3) for 6 years when the Bodhisattva practised self-mortification [13.2]; and
- (4) up to sometime in the 1st year after the awakening (the 1st year of the ministry), when he (Māra) appears to the Buddha, as recorded in **the Satta Vassa Sutta** (S 4.24), SD 36.5.

Clearly, for this reason, **the Satta Vassa Sutta** says that “Māra the bad one had been pursuing the Blessed One for 7 years” (S 4.24,2).⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁵ See SD 36.2 (3.1.2).

⁵¹⁶ J 1:63,17-25; BA 282,33-283,5.

⁵¹⁷ For further details on the 7 years, see SD 36.5 (1.1.3).

9.1.2.3 Who is Māra? The Commentaries tell us that there are 5 kinds of Māra (*pañca māra*), the embodiments or manifestations of bad or evil:⁵¹⁸

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| (1) the defilements as Māra, | <i>kilesa, māra</i> |
| (2) the 5 aggregates as Māra, | <i>khandha, māra</i> |
| (3) karma-formations as Māra, | <i>abhisankhāra, māra</i> |
| (4) the deity Māra, and | <i>deva, putta māra</i> |
| (5) death as Māra. | <i>maccu, māra</i> |

Since the Bodhisattva was not yet awakened, he still had mental defilements, at least in subtle form, that is, the latent tendencies of lust, ill will and ignorance. However, we have no record of their manifesting beyond their latent state. He certainly had the 5 aggregates, like anyone else who was not an arhat. His karma-formations (karmic activities) were still active—technically, he was still creating karma, at least the good ones, such as his act of renunciation. And he was still subject to the 5th kind of Māra—that is, death—but for the last time, since he would attain buddhahood.

9.1.2.4 Of special interest here is **the deity Māra** (*deva, putta māra*). Theoretically, we may dismiss the Māra that appeared to the Bodhisattva at the Kapilavatthu city-gate [9.1.2.1] as being merely his own thoughts, even his alter ego addressing him. Psychologically, once he was out of the city—something he had greatly anticipated—the thought might have crossed his mind that he could still turn back and take up the role of a world-monarch. Of course, then, it would no more be a spiritual drama with mythic proportions or cosmic significance; it would be merely *a personal struggle*.

Interestingly, Māra manifests himself only to the Buddha, the saints (including the arhats), monastic meditators and the gods (devas and brahmas).⁵¹⁹ Māra, as far as we know from the suttas, does not appear to any layperson, not even to the best of lay-meditators, Citta Gaha, pati.⁵²⁰ Neither does Māra appear to any of the monastics or laypersons who are immoral, even the “worst” of them, Devadatta. They are already under Māra’s thumb, so to speak.

Hence, we can provisionally conclude that Māra is a mythical device or process used by the Buddha and early Buddhist teachers to signify the lingering thought-processes that still arise in the minds of arhats (the Buddha is one of them), the saints and the good monastics. Such thoughts, however, are clearly rooted in the past, but neither harm them (except to terrify or distract the non-arhats)⁵²¹ nor significantly hinder the spiritual progress of the unawakened.

9.1.2.5 In the suttas, Māra is depicted as wielding the greatest power over the sense-world (the 1st of the 3 worlds; the other two being the form world and the formless world). However, **the Brahma Nimantanika Sutta** (M 49) records Māra as appearing even in a 1st-dhyana Brahma-world, where he seizes the minds of Mahā Brahmā himself and of the other brahmas present. The brahmas are able to attract Māra because of their views that they are world-creators and that Mahā Brahmā is the first to arise in the universe.

Only the Buddha (who is free from all views) knows of Māra’s presence and is able to restrain him.⁵²² Māra, in other words, has dominance over all that exist—in this sense, he is the most powerful of all deities—since all the other gods, even the highest (since they exist) are under his sway. The brahmas of

⁵¹⁸ Listed at Vism 211; UA 216; SnA 455,11; ThaA 2:16, 46; VAT:Se 1/481; DAṬ 1:16 f; DAaṬ:Be 1:22, 17:6. Partial list at NmA 1:170; PmA 3:699. Alluded to at ItA 1:149; ThaA 2:226; ApA 530.

⁵¹⁹ On Māra appearing to the brahmas, see **Brahma, nimantanikā S** (M 49), SD 11.7.

⁵²⁰ On Citta Gaha, pati, see SD 8.6 (8.3) & SD 16.16 (1); also DEBN sv.

⁵²¹ On Māra’s appearance to Ānanda, see **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16,3.3-3.6), SD 9.

⁵²² M 49 (SD 11.7).

the higher form-realms and formless realms may enjoy lengthy world-periods of respite from Māra's power, but even this is only *temporary* (an astronomically long time is still *time*). In other words, they will all be reborn and redie, we are doing time—this is the way of Māra.

9.1.2.6 Note that when the Bodhisattva asked who Māra was, he answered that he was **Vasa,vatti**, “the wielder of power.” This is the same name as the High God of the Para,nimitta,vasavattī devas (those who lord over others' creations). They are even more powerful than the “creator gods” of the Nimmāṇa,-ratī (those who delight in creation). The gods of the Para,nimitta,vasavattī devas—at least their lord Vasavattī—does not even have to create but orders others to do this task for him! Apparently, he is able even to create worlds—perhaps symbolizing the creative nature of the physical universe, say, of new stars and systems arising.⁵²³

Māra, as **Vasavatti** (which is probably a title),⁵²⁴ resides in the Paranimitta,vasavattī heaven, ruling over a part of it as a sort of recalcitrant vassal (MA 1:33 f). Incidentally, the Paranimitta,vasavattī realm is the *highest* of the sense-world realms.⁵²⁵ Māra lords over the sense-world, and wherever the senses and the unawakened mind work, Māra is present or lies latent.

9.1.2.7 That Māra should appear to Siddhattha for *the first time when he renounced the world* [9.1.2] is significant. Surely Māra, as a deva,putra (a divine being), would know of the Bodhisattva's advent in the human world and stopped him, or at least distracted him, at any point before the renunciation, but he did not. Māra only started appearing to the Bodhisattva beginning with his renunciation.

The Bodhisattva's departure from Kapilavatthu and great renunciation signify his rite of passage into **manhood**. Siddhattha was now a man in his own right, free from his father's shadow. In coming out into the spacious light of his quest, Siddhattha had to contend with a greater darkness—that of Māra. This is an inner darkness that comes with personal freedom. Such a freedom exposed Siddhattha to a wide range of possibilities, from choosing to become the most powerful person in the world to the most liberated and liberating individual in the cosmos.

Māra here embodies the security and familiarity of our past. Either way, Māra represents the status quo, the fixed way that things were, and we are but a cog or wheel in the predictable machinery of life, the paper chase, the rat-race, the tribal routine. Any kind of change or progress must feed back into this predictability of **the crowd**.

The individual who tries to rise above the crowd or take a different path must face Māra who blocks that path. Māra, like a good shepherd, goads him back into the herd, the tribe, where Māra will provide for everything that he would need or want—as long as he keeps to the ways of the herd, the tribe, the species, the past. Māra wants to maintain us simply as a biological being, a social statistic. In short, Māra is the antithesis of personal development, of individuation, of full awakening.

9.1.2.8 In his subtlest and most pervasive form, Māra, we can say, is the nature of **impermanence** itself. This especially implies whatever we can and do sense with our physical senses and the mind. Whatever can be sensed are conditioned; whatever is conditioned (that which exists) must be impermanent.

In this sense, Māra is inherent in all things in this universe, earthly, worldly and heavenly. Whatever exist must exist in time; they are all impermanent [18.3.3.3]. For that reason, when we constantly reflect

⁵²³ On whether Māra has access to the form world, see SD 11.7 (8.2).

⁵²⁴ The devaputra Vasavatti Māra attacks the Bodhisattva under the Bodhi tree just before the Great Awakening, in an attempt to prevent him from becoming Buddha (BA 287 f).

⁵²⁵ *Para,nimitta,vasavattī* mean “those who lord over the creation of others.” Technically, this is just the kind of heaven, lorded by its Almighty—very much like the biblical notion of God Almighty! On the location of the Para,-nimitta,vasavatti world in early Buddhist cosmology, see SD 1.7 (App) or DEB App 3.

on *impermanence*, we safely keep Māra at bay by gripping him by the neck!⁵²⁶ Māra is restrained by our knowing him, blinded by dhyana (the deeply liberated mind), and defeated by awakening.⁵²⁷

[9.2 THE RIVER ANOMĀ](#)

[9.2.1 Leaving Kapilavatthu](#)

9.2.1.1 The Bodhisattva forsook world-monarchy even while it lay within his reach—he rejected it like a blob of spittle, without any desire for it. He left Kapilavatthu in great glory—surrounded by the gods and other beings—on the full-moon day of Āsāḥa [2.4.1], under the descendent asterism of that star (on the day that commemorates his conception) [2.4.1.2].

Once outside of Kapilavatthu, the Bodhisattva felt a desire to look at the city, as if bidding it farewell (*apaloketu, kāmo jāto*). The narrator tells us that when this wish arose in his mind, the great earth turned around (*mahā, paṭhavī ... parivatti*) like a potter’s wheel that had broken loose, as if saying: “Great being, having accomplished yourself thus far, you have no need of turning around to gaze at the city!” Anyway, it was the horse Kaṅṭhaka who turned around so that Siddhattha could see Kapilavatthu.

The Bodhisattva stood before the city and gazed at it, as if in respect for it for having supported and sheltered him all this time. Where the Bodhisattva stood and gazed at Kapilavatthu became a sacred spot, the site of the “shrine of Kaṅṭhaka’s turning around” (*kaṅṭhaka, nivattana cetiya*). Thus, the Bodhisattva honoured both the city and his horse.⁵²⁸

9.2.1.2 The Bodhisattva’s spontaneous gesture of **turning about to gaze at the city** where he was born, raised, and caught the first glimpses of life’s true realities—this is a very moving gesture. When this gaze is directed to a physical object, such as a city or a tree, it is a gesture of love and gratitude. When the gaze is directed to a quality, such as a teaching, it literally means “seeing,” that is, reflecting leading to understanding. In either case, the same word, *dassana*, “seeing,” is used.

A similar gazing is done by the Buddha very soon after his awakening. The Commentaries inform us that the Buddha, during the 2nd week after the great awakening, *stands* in meditation, gazing with the unblinking eye at the Bodhi tree, grateful for its having sheltered him during his struggle for awakening. This spot came to be called **the shrine of the unblinking eye** (*animisa, cetiya*).⁵²⁹

While it is possible that the Buddha is actually gazing with open eyes fully focused on the Bodhi tree, this is unlikely if we go by the nature of dhyanic experience. It is more probable that he begins by gazing at the Bodhi tree as his meditation object, and holding that image, he goes into dhyana. This would account for his ability to keep to a single still posture of standing for a full week.⁵³⁰

9.2.1.3 A parallel to the gazing at a city is done by the Buddha during his last journey, as recorded in **the Mahā, parinibbāna Sutta** (D 9). Its 4th recital (*bhāṇavāra*) (or chapter 4) opens with the Buddha going on almsround in Vesālī with Ānanda, and they leave the city for the forested outskirt. The Buddha then turns around and gazes at **Vesālī “with the elephant look”** (*nāgāpalokita*), declaring: “Ānanda, this is the last time the Tathāgata will be looking at Vesālī.”

The gesture here is the same as that of the Bodhisattva’s gazing at Kapilavatthu, where it is called “Kaṅṭhaka’s turning around” (the focus is on the Bodhisattva’s horse), in the Mahā, parinibbāna Sutta, the Buddha himself turns around like an elephant. Hence, it is called “the elephant gaze” (*nāgāpalokita*), that

⁵²⁶ On the perception of impermanence as the way to streamwinning, see **Entering the stream** (SD 3.3).

⁵²⁷ See **Māra**, SD 61.8.

⁵²⁸ J 1:63,25-33; BA 6,8-10, 283,5-13.

⁵²⁹ MA 2:184; UA 52; BA 8; J 1:77.

⁵³⁰ SD 26.1 (5.2.2).

is, he turns his whole body around to gaze at Vesālī. There is also a wordplay on *nāga* here, which also refers to an arhat.⁵³¹

9.2.1.4 Both as Bodhisattva and as Buddha, Gotama shows the gesture of **gratitude** (*kataññu kata,-veditā*) to the city that has supported him and, which has responded positively to the Dharma. The Pali expression for gratitude has two aspects: the first is a mental acknowledgement of the kindness shown; the second is our appreciation of it by joyfully reciprocating—in Gotama’s case, he lovingly gazes at Kapilavatthu [9.2.1.1] on leaving the world behind, and at Vesālī [9.2.1.3] on leaving this world totally behind for final nirvana.

9.2.1.5 There is another kind of “**turning around**” (*nivattana*) gestured by the Buddha, that is, the turning-around in compassion. This gesture is famously executed by the Buddha when he turns around to face the serial murderer, Aṅgulimāla, who, up to that point has been running after the Buddha, intending to kill him for just his finger to complete his garland of 1000 fingers. This story is recorded in **the Aṅgulimāla Sutta** (M 86).

Aṅgulimāla’s foolish teacher demands that he offers him a garland of 1000 human fingers, one from each person, as a “teacher’s honorarium” (*dakkhiṇa*). The Buddha intervenes when Aṅgulimāla is seeking his last victim for the 1000th finger. Aṅgulimāla is willing to kill even his own mother who has gone into the forest, risking her own life, to warn him of the king who has come with his army to hunt him down.

The Buddha makes sure that Aṅgulimāla sees him as an easy target—so that he does not kill his own mother, and also to convert him, to stop him from his violent and murderous life. Aṅgulimāla runs after the Buddha from behind, but is not able to catch up with him. Every time he reaches within arm’s length of the Buddha, the earth, it seems, turns around, and he finds the Buddha behind him again, and he has to keep on turning around to face the Buddha and running after him all over again.⁵³²

This is Aṅgulimāla’s **Sisyphian run**, a samsaric goose-chase, but this is a golden goose that is worth chasing. Unlike Sisyphus, however, who seems to enjoy his samsaric run downhill after the rolling rock, to the valley-bottom where it stops, and then pushing it uphill again with vigour, so that it will roll downhill again: the Greek gods delight and sport in human weakness, and often treat them wantonly like hamsters in cages with samsaric wheels.⁵³³

Aṅgulimāla, however, *does* tire, ironically, despite the Buddha’s standing still, whom he keeps running after with all his speed and strength. Completely tired out, he finally stops, and calls out to the Buddha to *stop*, too.

The Buddha replies that he has never been “running” all that while—meaning that he has stopped killing and given up violence—but Aṅgulimāla is still *running*, he has been violently killing. This is a classic example of the 2 levels of language—the spiritual and the worldly [8.1.3.2]—which frees Aṅgulimāla of his false violent nature so that he regains *his natural non-violent and wholesome nature* that he is born with as Ahimsaka (the non-violent).⁵³⁴

Another occasion when the Buddha makes the earth “turn” thus is when **Ānanda** stands right in front of him to prevent the intoxicated elephant Nāḷāgiri (let loose by Devadatta) from trampling the

⁵³¹ On *nāga* referring to an arhat, see V 2:195,28*, 5:3,29*; **Upāli S** (M 56,29(5)/1:386,15*, where see n (SD 27.1); **Sakalika S** (S 1.38/1:28), SD 61.4; **Nāga S** (A 6.43/3:347,15*), SD 81.6; **Nāga Vagga** (Dh canto 23); Ap 20,13, 460,26. For etym, see Sn 522 (**Sabhiya S**, SD 77.8); Nm 201,20 f; for more etyms, see **Upāli S** (M 56,29 n), SD 27.1.

⁵³² M 86/2:97-105 (SD 5.11).

⁵³³ On Sisyphus, see SD 23.3 (1); SD 48.3 (1.2.2.2); SD 49.2 (4.3.2.1); SD 50.8 (1.2.1.7; 2.3.2.6).

⁵³⁴ M 86,4-6/2:99 f + SD 5.11 (2.2). There is also the similar case of Kisā Gotamī’s Sisyphian walk: SD 43.2.

Buddha. Ānanda remains where he is despite the Buddha forbidding him thrice. The Buddha “makes the earth turn around” to get Ānanda out of the way.⁵³⁵

9.2.1.6 Here again we see (looking back) nothing new in the miraculous life of the Bodhisattva. The key moments of his Bodhisattva’s life, his key actions before his awakening are, as a rule, signs or hints of greater spiritual things to come when he is Buddha: as the child, so the man; as the Bodhisattva, so the Buddha.

It is his nature (*dhammatā*) to do so, to be wholesome, and to be moved by compassion and wisdom, which he does best as the Buddha. It is his *nature* because he has been practising so for countless past lives:

This is that Blossom on our human tree
Which opens once in many myriad years—
But opened, fills the world with Wisdom’s scent
And Love’s dropped honey ...⁵³⁶ [1.3.2.2]

9.2.2 Across 3 realms

9.2.2.1 Having finally come out of Kapilavatthu, the Bodhisattva, accompanied by devas, rode 30 yojanas⁵³⁷ through 3 “kingdoms” or rather realms (*rajja*)⁵³⁸ [2.2.1.18]—those of the Sakyas, the Koliyas and the Mallas—all in one night.⁵³⁹ In historical terms, this is about 555 km (345 mi)—and riding a horse with Channa holding on its tail! This is more than mere history: it is the dramatization of the making of the greatest man of history. It would not help to simply say “they rode hard into the night.”

The Jātaka Nidāna even asks: “Why was the horse not able to go farther?”⁵⁴⁰ After all, in the imagination of the ancient story-tellers, Kaṇṭhaka was the horse-jewel of the man who would be world-monarch. This was a magical horse, like the world-monarch (or wheel-turner) Mahā Sudassana’s Valahaka: the Sutta tells us that once, to test his horse, he “mounts him at dawn and travels along the horizon of the oceans that bounds the land, and then returns to the royal city of Kusā,vātī in time for breakfast.”⁵⁴¹

The Jātaka Nidāna gave an enigmatic explanation which must have delighted the audience of the day. Kaṇṭhaka’s progress was greatly impeded by having to plough through the tangled mass of heavenly perfumes, garlands, scented powder and incense (*gandhehi mālehi cuṇṇehi dhūpehi*) that the devas, nagas and suparnas⁵⁴² had rained down, which piled up to the height of his flanks. Surely, such debris must have slowed down even the best horses!⁵⁴³

In other words, Kaṇṭhaka could have ridden farther if its master wished to, but it was far enough. Moreover, we must imagine that dawn had already broken—such a magnificent riding team could have easily been noticed by others. Then, rumours would quickly spread back to Kapilavatthu.

⁵³⁵ J 533/5:335 f; DhA 1.12/1:140 f.

⁵³⁶ Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia*, bk 1, London, 1879.

⁵³⁷ A distance of some 555 km (345 mi). The distance today between Kapilavastu (P *kapila,vatthu*) and Rajgir (P *raja,gaha*) is some 490 km (304 mi) (via EW Highway/AH2). On *yojana*, see (2.2.1.10) n & SD 47.8 (2.4.4.2).

⁵³⁸ J 1:64,11; BA 6,8, 283,19 f.

⁵³⁹ J 1:64,11; BA 283,19; VvA 314,8. Mvst only mention they “rode 12 yojanas southwards from Kapilavastu to the region of the Mallas, to a place called Anomiya, not far from the hermitage of the seer Vaśiṣṭha” (Mvst 2:164).

⁵⁴⁰ J 1:64,12 f.

⁵⁴¹ D 17,1.13.3/2:175 (SD 36.12).

⁵⁴² “Nagas” (*nāga*, ts) and “suparnas” (*supaṇṇa*; Skt *suparṇa*): see (11.2.1.1) nn.

⁵⁴³ J 1:64,11-19; BA 283,19 f.

9.2.2.2 Why did the Bodhisattva ride through 3 kingdoms? We are told that these kingdoms or realms were those of the Sakyas, the Koliyas and the Mallas (BA 5) [2.2.1.13]. It would be difficult for Siddhattha to renounce and remain amongst the Sakyas for obvious reasons. Even to live as a renunciant amongst the Koliyas would be troubling since it was the realm of his father-in-law, Suppabuddha. The Mallas were one of the 16 great states (*mahā, janapada*) [2.2.1.18], located north of Magadha. They were distant enough from Kapilavatthu to be “neutral” territory.

9.2.3 Crossing the Anomā

9.2.3.1 After riding 30 joyanas right through the night across 3 realms [9.2.2.2], the Bodhisattva stopped on a river-bank. When he asked Channa (who acted as his commentator or informant), he replied that it was **the Anomā** (meaning “not mean”) river.⁵⁴⁴ Pensively, he retorted, “Then, *not mean* will be our renunciation (*amhākam pi pabbajjā anomā bhavissati!*)”

9.2.3.2 Then, signaling Kaṇṭhaka by pressing him with his heel, he sprang forward and stood on the far bank of the river that was 8 usabhas wide [6.2.1.3], that is, about 504 m (551 yd). If we scale down the mythic dimensions, and take it as 8 spans (*vidatthi*) [8.2.3.1], we have the more probable distance of 183 m (200 yd), but still a very wide river!⁵⁴⁵

This makes “**crossing the Anomā**”—unlike Julius Caesar crossing the shallow river Rubicon with his army, starting a civil war that made him dictator—a Buddhist idiom for passing a point of no-return in terms of a wholesome action, especially when we have understood the suttas and Dharma so well that we will never fall for other teachings or practices. We have renounced our old ways of self-centredness, superstition and doubt, for selflessness, moral courage and wisdom.

10 Renunciation

10.1 CHANNA’S REQUEST

10.1.1 Upon landing on the far bank of the Anomā, the Bodhisattva alighted from Kaṇṭhaka. Standing on the wide sandy bank, which was like a sheet of silver, he addressed the groom: “Channa, my friend, go back with my ornaments and Kaṇṭhaka. I will become a renunciant!”

“Sire, I, too, wish to renounce!”

Thrice he requested and thrice the Bodhisattva refused him, saying: “It is not proper that you become a renunciant now. You must go back!”

Then, he handed over his ornaments and Kaṇṭhaka to Channa to be taken back to Kapilavatthu.

10.1.2 Channa, the Bodhisattva’s groom, charioteer and commentator, was the only human witness of the great renunciation. Sadly, this unique privilege—although it conduced to his own renunciation later (during the Buddha’s 1st visit to Kapilavatthu)—did not at once make him a better individual. It was as if he had lost all bearing, having lost his master, to whom he had dedicated himself, and without whom his life seemed to lack meaning and purpose. He was like Stevens, the butler in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Remains of the Day* (1989), who is so dedicated to the service of his master that, after losing him, he is unable to express his own feelings or work for his own happiness.⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴⁴ J 1:64,12-20, 4:119,19; SnA 382,2 f; DhA 1:85,19; DhsA 34,17; UA 54,s; ThĀ 2,3; VvA 314,9; DA 1:57,32, 77,19; Dāṭhv 1:32; Jinac 195; Mahbv 26,18.

⁵⁴⁵ J 1:19-23; BA 283,21-45.

⁵⁴⁶ Kazuo Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, London: Faber and Faber, 1989.

10.1.3 Despite his great affection for and attachment to the Buddha, perhaps because of them, **Channa** became arrogant in considering “our Buddha, our Dharma,” besides his inherited conceit of being a kshatriya (*khattiya, māna*). Mythically speaking, he became a sort of Buddhist **Narcissus**,⁵⁴⁷ with a variance: what Channa sees in his own mind’s pool is not his own reflection, but his master’s image. In this sense, he is the model, even prototype, of the classic English butler unquestioningly loyal to his master.

Channa’s “butler” narcissism and arrogance were, in the end, self-defeating. He failed in his tasks as a monk even while the Buddha lived. While dwelling in Kosambī, he was unwilling to acknowledge an offence he committed that the Buddha decreed a formal act of suspension (*ukkhepaniya, kamma*), forbidding him commensality (eating together) and dwelling with the monks.⁵⁴⁸

He continued to commit other offences, especially disrespecting and reviling senior monks.⁵⁴⁹ One of the last acts of the Buddha was to instruct Ānanda to impose the “supreme penalty” (*brahma, daṇḍa*), that is, a total boycott of Channa by the sangha. By the time Ānanda executed the order, the Buddha had died. Almost immediately Channa diligently worked to correct himself—as movingly reported in **the (Lakkhaṇa) Channa Sutta** (S 22.90).⁵⁵⁰ His elder’s verse, **Tha 69**, however, has no hint of his difficulties at all.⁵⁵¹

10.2 THE SHRINE OF THE CREST-GEM

10.2.1 After handing over to Channa all his ornaments, the Bodhisattva thought that his long princely hair did not suit a renunciant that he had become. Seeing no one worthy of cutting off his hair, he decided to cut off his long hair himself. Holding his sword in his right hand and the top-knot with its diadem in his left, he cut off his hair. What remained of his hair, it was said, were two fingers-breadth long and curled rightwise. They remained so, as did his beard, for the rest of his life. It was not necessary for him to shave off his hair or beard ever again. So the legend goes.

The Bodhisattva then took his top-knot together with its diadem, and threw it skywards, declaring, “If I will become Buddha, let it remain in the sky. If not, let it fall to the ground!” His top-knot, plaited with gems, rose to the height of a yojana [2.2.1.10] and remained mid-air. Sakra, the king of the gods, saw this with his divine eye, and collected it into a jewel golden casket, the size of a yojana (1.8 m or 6 ft cubed).⁵⁵² He installed it as **the shrine of the crest-gem** (*cūḷā, maṇi cetiya*) in Tāvātimsa heaven.⁵⁵³

10.2.2 If we take the Buddha as a historical person, it is difficult to imagine him as having a wig-like curled-up hair and beard. Indeed, other than these statements here, we find no other references, especially in the suttas, for such personal features of the Buddha. This tradition might have been influenced by Greek artistic tradition, such as the depiction of the Buddha seen in Gandhāra images. Such an influence arrived in northwest India within a couple of centuries after Alexander’s advance to

⁵⁴⁷ In Greek mythology, **Narcissus** (Gk, Narkissos, Νάρκισσος), was a hero of the city of Thespieae in Boeotia (nw of Athens), who was renowned for his beauty who felt no one was worthy of his love, and ended up loving himself. Several versions of his myth have survived: Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*; Pausanias’ *Guide to Greece* (9.31.7); and in the Oxyrhynchus papyri. On Narcissus, see SD 34.1 (2.5.2.2). On narcissism, see SD 19.2a (4); SD 38.4 (3.3.3).

⁵⁴⁸ Cuv 1.18 (V 2:23 f).

⁵⁴⁹ Cuv 11.1.12-16 (V 2:290-292); DhA 6.3/2:110-112 ad Dh 78. Cf DA 2:154,17-22. See also ThaA no 69.

⁵⁵⁰ S 22.90/3:132-135 (SD 56.5). See also SD 52.3 (1.3.5.4).

⁵⁵¹ For details & refs, see DPPN: 3. Channa

⁵⁵² As a distance measurement, the “greater yojana” is 11.25 m = 7 mi. The casket measurement, usu a small object, is prob that of the “lesser yojana” [2.2.1.4(2)].

⁵⁵³ J 1:64,26-65,9; BA 6,10-12, 283,28-284,8.

the very borders of India [2.2.1.17], and spread with the Greek colonies he left behind. All this was well before the Commentarial period.⁵⁵⁴

10.2.3 How did the Buddha really look like? Our best sources are the early Indian suttas. From the Vinaya and the suttas, we are often given the clear impression that the Buddha looked very much like any other bona fide monk. Just as the Buddha made the Vinaya rules, he kept to them, too: “As I say, so I do; as I do, so I say.”⁵⁵⁵ In other words, the Buddha kept his head shaven, and wore rag-robles just like any other good monk.

Furthermore, there is clear evidence that on many occasions not everyone is able to at once recognize the Buddha on seeing him. The first occasion is recorded in **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2), when king Ajātasattu (son of king Bimbisara) has to ask his physician, Jīvaka, which of the many monks in the assembly before him is the Buddha. Jīvaka points out to him that the Buddha is the one sitting against the pillar facing the east.⁵⁵⁶

The second case is that of a monk’s inability to recognize the Buddha, recorded in **the Dhātu Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 140). The monk Pukkusāti, on his journey to meet the Buddha, spends the night en route, in a potter’s hut. The Buddha decides to meet him there, but Pukkusāti is unable to recognize him—that is, until midway in the Buddha’s teaching to him! At the end of the discourse, he apologizes and acknowledges the Buddha as his teacher.⁵⁵⁷

From all this, it is clear that the Buddha—as a historical person—was clean-shaven of hair and beard, just like any other Vinaya-abiding virtuous monastic. The question we should ask is: Why do the mythical accounts of the Bodhisattva and Buddha present him otherwise [10.2.1]?

10.2.4 Why did the Commentators tell us of the Bodhisattva’s renunciation that “*what remained of his hair, it was said, were two fingers-breadth long and curled rightwise. They remained so, as did his beard, for the rest of his life. It was not necessary for him to shave off his hair or beard ever again*” [10.2.1]? In mythical terms, this means that—like the crossing of the Anomā river—there was no turning back for him. While the river-crossing signifies what the Bodhisattva is heading for and sure to attain, that is, buddhahood, the unchanging nature of his looks signifies that it is a state that once he has attained, he will never lose it. The Buddha’s compassion, wisdom, awakening and liberation are final, and there is nothing more beyond that.

10.3 THE 8 REQUISITES

10.3.1 Clearly now that the Bodhisattva had shaven off his hair and beard, declaring himself a **renunciant** (*pabbajita*), he had to divest himself of his princely clothes and invest himself in the outfit of a renunciant. “These garments of Kāsī cloth do not suit me!” he concluded.

⁵⁵⁴ The Indo-Greek (or Graeco-Indian) kingdoms Hellenized kingdoms in various parts to the NW of India, mainly Pakistan and Afghanistan, including parts of NW India itself, and ruled by over 30 kings (180 BCE-10 CE): https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indo-Greek_Kingdom. It was clearly Greek influence that induced the Indian Buddhists to create anthropomorphic (human) images of the Buddha, despite the traditional aniconic tradition before that: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aniconism_in_Buddhism. It was also possible that it was the figure of Alexander the Great (4th cent BCE) that induced the early Buddhists to introduce the concept of the “great man” (*mahā, -purisa*), which does not seem to have any Indian antecedents: see **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 30) + SD 36.9 (3).

⁵⁵⁵ D 2:224, 229, 3:135; M 1:108, 109; A 2:24; It 122; Sn 357 (Nigrodha,kappa); J 326/3:89.

⁵⁵⁶ **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 2,11/1:50), SD 8.10.

⁵⁵⁷ **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140,22.2 n), SD 4.17 & SD 44.1 (2.3.5). See Reflection, “What the Buddha really looks like,” R135b, 2010.

Then, the great brahma **Ghaṭikāra**, his erstwhile companion in Kassapa Buddha's time, their friendship still warm for the whole of a buddha-period,⁵⁵⁸ thought: "Today, my friend has gone forth in the great renunciation. I will go to him with the recluse's requisites (*samaṇa,parikkhāra*)."

273 The 3 robes, the bowl, | the razor, the needle, the girdle, and
the water-strainer—these are the 8 (requisites) | of a monk devoted to the practice.⁵⁵⁹

10.3.2 The story of the Bodhisattva so far (that is, up to his renunciation) appears to develop smoothly. Whenever there was any impasse or challenge, the problem seemed to solve itself, or with some divine intervention. Our study of the miraculous life of the Bodhisattva began in Tusita, where the Bodhisattva was surrounded by the contented gods [2.1.1.2].

While gestating in Māyā's womb, he was protected by the gods [2.7]; when he was born, the gods celebrated [3.2.1]; even in the 3 mansions, he was attended by musicians who were "non-men" (*nip-purisa*) [6.1.1.1], who could well be gods in disguise. Then, when it was time, the gods sent down one of their own to project the 4 sights [7.2.1], seeing which the young Siddhattha decided to renounce the world.

He left home secretly in the dark of night [8.2.4.1] with only his groom and horse—and a multitude of jubilating gods who ensured that no other humans interrupted the process [8.2.1.1]. When he found the city-gate bolted fast, the resident-god easily opened it [8.2.3.1].

Up to this point, we can say that the smooth flow of events for the Bodhisattva simply signified the ripening of his **good karma** on a grand scale—what is technically known as "perfections" (*pāramī*). In other words, he was heading for buddhahood. All this was, in fact, a kind of celebration of the path to buddhahood—a retelling of the epic that had already happened.

It is a **mythical** depiction of the most important event in human history. Here, we see myth as a way of retelling or replaying an epic human drama of awakening in divine terms or on the cosmic stage—with all sentient beings as the cast and the Bodhisattva taking the leading role. It is the grandest celebration of existential awakening.

10.3.3 Where the light is brightest, the shadow cast is darkest. The cosmic drama was then interrupted by the darkest of shadows—**Māra**, the supreme lord of all existence. He tried to stop the hero from his quest: leaving home signified leaving the world, to be free from existence itself, to be beyond life is to be beyond death, too. Hence, the lord of life is also the lord of death, that is, Maccu Māra [9.1.2.3].

When the Bodhisattva rejected Māra's invitation to turn back, he renounced any worldly quest for power over all civilization. Māra then warned him that he would be stalking him and watching, waiting for him to show the slightest human flaw. Māra represents our dark past, when we were still immature and unwise, bogged down in doubts and errors, deluded in dogmas and religions.

The Bodhisattva was like **a lotus**. Though his roots were in the mud of existence, his being was the stalk rising through the murky waters, clouded up by Māra. He blossomed into a lotus, floating just below the water-surface, waiting for the sun-rise. The sun would surely rise. Māra was warning him that if he were ever to fall back into the dark waters, it would at once overwhelm him again. We, like the gods, celebrate, because we know for certain that the lotus will surely rise and shine in the sun. We are celebrating the Buddha who has come.

⁵⁵⁸ During the time of Kassapa Buddha, the Bodhisattva was the brahmin youth, Joti.pāla. For details, see **(Maj-jhima) Ghaṭikāra S** (M 81), SD 49.3.

⁵⁵⁹ J 1:65,10-22; BA 284,9-21.

10.3.4 At this point—when the Bodhisattva had renounced the world [10.3.1]—a new God of even greater majesty and goodness, a great brahma (*mahā, brahmā*), deferently appears to him. He is a divine being of boundless love, ruth, joy and peace, from a heaven well beyond the gods of the sense-world. In fact, he is a non-returner of the Avihā realm, one of the pure abodes in the 4th-dhyana form world. The 7-year-old Siddhattha attained the 1st dhyana under the jambul tree during the ploughing festival [5.2.2.2], but as the Buddha, he mastered all the 8 dhyanas and the attainment of cessation.⁵⁶⁰

If Māra is the archetype of **the shadow**, our dark past still lurking in the present, ready to thwart our progress, then Mahā Brahmā is an archetype of **the wise old man**, distinguished for goodness and sound judgement. Another such archetypal great brahma is Brahmā Sahampati, the one who requests the Buddha to teach the Dharma.⁵⁶¹

10.3.5 The friendship between Brahma Ghaṭikāra and the Bodhisattva went back a very long time, to the time of Kassapa Buddha, when Ghaṭikāra was a potter caring for his blind parents and the Bodhisattva was a faithless brahmin youth (*māṇava*) named Joti, pāla. Their friendship is recorded in **the (Majjhima) Ghaṭikāra Sutta** (M 81), where, on account of Ghaṭikāra’s relentless persuasiveness, Jotipāla is made to meet the Buddha.

As a result, Jotipāla renounces the world under Kassapa. It should be noted then, there is no hint at all that Jotipāla has taken any vow to buddhahood or that Kassapa makes any such prediction. Jotipāla is at first faithless, but once he hears the Dharma, he is moved to renounce the world⁵⁶² [18.4.2.1]. Interestingly, it is also Ghaṭikāra (now a non-returner brahma) who is said to have brought about the 4 sights so that Siddhattha renounces the world the final time to become the Buddha. [8.3.4.2]

10.4 KANṬHAKA DIES

10.4.1 The Bodhisattva, having received the offering of the recluse’s 8 requisites from Brahmā Ghatikāra, donned the “banner of the arhat” (*arahad, dhaja*), that is, the monastic robes—he was now a full-fledged renunciant. He then dismissed Channa, saying: “Channa, tell my parents on my behalf that I am well.” Channa saluted the Bodhisattva, and reverently circled him sunwise.

10.4.2 Kaṇṭhaka, who stood nearby, had been listening to the conversation between the Bodhisattva and Channa. Unable to endure the fact that he would no longer see his master, as soon as he was out of sight of the Bodhisattva, died of a broken heart.

Although Kaṇṭhaka died of a broken heart, his last thought must have been peaceful, knowing fully well he had served his master right to the end, when he had no more need of him, now that he was a renunciant. Kaṇṭhaka was reborn as a deva, putra named Kaṇṭhaka in a most lovely abode in the heaven of the 33.⁵⁶³

However, it was Channa who was most sorrowful. At first, Channa’s grief was only for his master’s departure as a renunciant. Now, with Kaṇṭhaka’s death, he is afflicted with a second grief. He returned to Kapilavatthu weeping and lamenting.⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁶⁰ These are the 9 abodes (*anupubba, vihāra*): **Jhānābhiññā S** (S 16.9), SD 50.7 (1.2.1.2).

⁵⁶¹ SD 12.2 (2). I’m only using these terms as a matter of convenience, not a technical endorsement of any Jungian archetypes. The purpose here is an elucidation of a Buddhist psychology of mythology. For further details and refs for Jung’s ideas, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jungian_archetypes.

⁵⁶² M 81/2:45-54 (SD 49.3).

⁵⁶³ His **Vimāna, vatthu** verses are at Vv 7.7/81 (VvA 311-319).

⁵⁶⁴ J 1:65,22-29; BA 284,22-30.

11 Rāja,gaha

11.1 ANUPIYA MANGO GROVE

11.1.1 Having gone forth as a renunciant, the Bodhisattva spent 7 days in the Anupiya⁵⁶⁵ mango grove enjoying the bliss of renunciation. He was blissfully calm, glorious in his monastic robes, radiant like the full autumn moon calmly “restraining the evening glow that lit up the rain-bearing clouds.”⁵⁶⁶ Even though he was alone, it was as though he was surrounded by a multitude, and ready to feed even the forest beasts and birds with the ambrosia of the death-free. He fared alone like a lion, a lion of men, walking mindfully like an elephant.⁵⁶⁷

11.1.2 The distance between Anupiya mango grove and Rājagaha is 30 yojanas (555 km = 345 mi)—coincidentally, the same as that between Kapilavatthu and the river Anomā (on which Anupiya mango grove stood) [9.2.2.1]. Yet, the Commentaries tell us that the Bodhisattva *walked* all the way there in a single day!⁵⁶⁸

There is no explanation how he did this—even if he was given a lift in a cart or a chariot, it is difficult to imagine anyone walking from Melaka (Malacca) to Pulau Pinang (Penang), or from London to Edinburgh, in a single day. Perhaps the story-tellers were not familiar with the Indian geography. However, the Sutta Nipāta Commentary on **the Pabbajjā Sutta** (Sn 3.1) credibly tells us that the Bodhisattva actually took a week (*satt’āha*) to walk there (SnA 382,17).⁵⁶⁹

Even if the story-tellers got the distances all wrong, the story remains just as valid and interesting. Somehow the Bodhisattva arrived in Rājagaha. His sojourn there was important enough to be the subject of an ancient text, **the Pabbajjā Sutta** (Sn 3.1).

11.2 THE 2 KSHATRIYAS

11.2.1 Bimbi,sāra (c 555-493 BCE)

11.2.1.1 In only a day, the Commentaries continued, he walked the earth for 30 yojanas [11.1.2]. He crossed the mighty Ganges, whose waters were untrammled, and entered the city of **Rāja,gaha**, a glorious royal abode (*rāja,gaha*), resplendent like hills of glittering treasures. Rājagaha was the capital of Magadha, Bimbisāra’s kingdom, the largest realm of the time. It was “the supreme city of the Magadhas” (*magadhānam pur’uttama*, Tha 622), and probably the largest in all India then.⁵⁷⁰

When it was time, he went on almsround at dawn, from house to house, successively (*sapadānam*).⁵⁷¹ The whole city was excited at the very sight of the Bodhisattva. It was like when Dhana,pālaka⁵⁷² entered

⁵⁶⁵ V 2:180,4 = D 3:1,4; DA 3:186; DhA 1:133; J 1:64 f; SnA 382; a town, *nagara*, and mango grove, UA 161.

⁵⁶⁶ *Sañjhā-p,pabhā’nurañjita,salila.dhara,samvuto* (BA 284,32).

⁵⁶⁷ J 1:65,29 f; BA 6,15-26, 284,30; ApA 70.

⁵⁶⁸ J 1:66,1; BA 284,36 f; ApA 70.

⁵⁶⁹ However, Nakamura’s estimation of the distance between Anupiya and Rājagaha is 640 km, and thinks that “[a] mendicant could not possibly cover the distance in such a short time.” (2000:117).

⁵⁷⁰ On *Magadha* as the name of a countru (*raṭṭha*) as well as a people (*janapadino*), see DA 1:294, SnA 1:135, ThaA 2:74 & Tha:N 165 n208. On Rājagaha, see Nakamura 2000:117-120.

⁵⁷¹ This is actually one of the optional ascetic practices (*dhut’āṅga*), many of which seem to be followed by ascetics outside the teaching. See Sekhiya 33 (V 4:191 f).

⁵⁷² Or, Dhana,pāla (J 3:293), another name for Nālā,giri, a royal elephant of Rājagaha. Devadatta intoxicates the elephant with toddy (coconut-palm wine) when the Buddha is walking on a narrow street, but is tamed by the

Rājagaha, or when the asura king was seen in the celestial city of the devas.⁵⁷³ The king's men went before him, saying: "Your majesty, such and such a being is going on almsround in the city. We do not know whether he is a deva, a human, a naga,⁵⁷⁴ or a suparna⁵⁷⁵?"⁵⁷⁶

Standing on the terrace of his palace, the king saw the great man,⁵⁷⁷ and awe and wonder arose in him. He summoned his men, saying:

"Go, men, and investigate! If he is a non-human, he will disappear on leaving the city. If he is a deity, he will go through the sky. If he is a naga, he will dive into the ground and disappear. If he is a human, he will eat the alms that he has collected."

As for the great man, he collected a mixed meal, and when he knew he had collected enough, he left the city by the gate through which he had entered. Sitting down facing the east, in the shadow of Paṇḍava hill, he began his meal. Then, his belly turned and he felt like throwing up.⁵⁷⁸ Being disgusted with such loathsome food, the likes of which he had never seen before, he then admonished himself:

"Siddhattha, you have come from a family in which food and drink are abundant, and you are used to eating meals prepared from fragrant *sāli* rice that takes three years to grow⁵⁷⁹ and various choice savours. Then, seeing a recluse in dust-heap rags, you wondered:

'When will I be able to go out to collect food-scrap and eat them?' You have gone forth wondering when is the time to do this. And what are you doing now?"

Having thus admonished himself, he was free of disgust and calmly ate his meal.

The king's men, having seen what had occurred, returned and reported to the king. Having heard the words of his messengers, the king left the city in haste and arrived in the Bodhisattva's presence. Being pleased at his deportment, the king offered him all supremacy.⁵⁸⁰ The Bodhisattva replied:

"Maharajah, I wish for neither objects of pleasure nor defilements of pleasure.⁵⁸¹ I have gone forth aspiring for supreme awakening."

The king, unable to win over the Bodhisattva's mind despite his various pleas, then said:

"Surely, you will be the Buddha! On attaining buddhahood, you must come first to my realm [to the realm that I have conquered]."⁵⁸²

This is given in brief. For the full account, it should be known that **the Pabbajjā Sutta**, beginning with the words, *Pabbajjam kittayissāmi | yathā pabbaji cakkhumā*, and its Commentary, should be consulted.⁵⁸³

Buddha's lovingkindness (V 2:194 f; J 5:333-337; Avadāna, śataka 1:177). On the past karma that fruited in Nālāgiri charging at the Buddha, see UA 265, Ap 1:300. For further comy on this passage, see SD 49.19 (5.7.3).

⁵⁷³ See eg **Khanti Vepa, citti S** (S 11.4), SD 54.17 & **Yavakalāpi S** (S 35.248), SD 40a.3.

⁵⁷⁴ A *naga* (*nāga*, ts) is a mythical serpent-being, inhabiting the depths of the earth, such as Kāla who guards the almsbowls of the past 4 buddhas [14.2.2] (V 1:3; U 2.1; J 1:80; BA 8, 241; Mvst 3:300, 302 (Skt *mucilinda*); DhsA 35).. The most famous naga in Buddhist mythology is Mucalinda who appears to the Buddha during the 6th week after the great awakening. They are prob a mythologization of the Nāga hill-tribes, such as the Kambalas and the Assataras (J 6:165; see DPPN: *nāga*). See SD 27.5a (6.2.1.1); SD 63.1.

⁵⁷⁵ A *suparna* (*supaṇṇa*; Skt *suparṇa*) is a fabulous harpy-like being or fairy-bird with bird-like lower torso and a human upper torso, with wings; enemies of the nagas. 4 kinds mentioned at S 3:246. Historically, they were prob the falcon-worshipping or falcon-rearing Iranians who conquered the Naga territories of north-west India. See SD 27.6a (6.2.0) n.

⁵⁷⁶ For further comy on this passage, see SD 49.19 (5.7.3).

⁵⁷⁷ "Great man," *mahā, purisa*, see **Mahā, purisa S** (S 47.11), SD 19.16; **Lakkhaṇa S** (D 30) + SD 36.9 (2.1.1.2).

⁵⁷⁸ *Ath'assa antāni parivattitvā mukhena nikkhaman'ākāra-p, pattāni ahesum*, lit, "His intestines turned, and reached a point when it acted as if it would come out of the mouth."

⁵⁷⁹ Cf Be Ce Ee *gandha, sāli, bhattam ...*; Se *gandha, sāli, taṇḍula, bhattam ...* (DhA 2:9,22); cf MA 3:283,10 f.

⁵⁸⁰ "All supremacy," *sabbarā issariyaṃ*.

⁵⁸¹ *Bodhisatto mayham mahā, rāja vatthu, kāmehi vā kilesa, kāmehi vā attho n'atthi*.

⁵⁸² *Addhā tvaṃ buddho bhavissasi. Buddha, bhūtena pana te paṭhamam mama vijitam āgantabbam*.

⁵⁸³ This is from **Jatāka Nidāna, kathā** (J 1:65,29-66,33), SD 49.19(5.6); also BA 6,26-33, 285,1-286,13.

11.2.1.2 The canonical version of the above events are found in **the (Sutta Nipāta) Pabbajjā Sutta** (Sn 3.1).⁵⁸⁴ The Sutta, however, tells us that it is Bimbi,sāra himself who first notices the Bodhisattva:

Standing atop his palace, Seeing him bearing the marks,	Bimbi,sāra saw him. he uttered his wish:	(Sn 409)
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Observe him, sirs! accomplished in demeanour,	He's truly handsome, great in frame, pure, looking merely a plough's length ahead.	(Sn 410)
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With downcast eyes, mindful, Let the royal messengers run after him,	from no low family is this one. to see where the monk will go."	(Sn 411)
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Further, the (Sutta Nipāta) Pabbajjā Sutta gives us important clues about the two young kshatriyas—the young Bimbisāra, who had been king of Magadha for less than a decade, and planning to unify Aṅga with Magadha, whereas the Bodhisattva wished to ascend the seat of awakening and teach suffering beings to liberate themselves.

It is also significant that Bimbisāra first sees the Bodhisattva to be “like a kshatriya” (Sn 420d) capable of “adorning the army’s van, | at the head of a noble troop of elephants,” and then offers him wealth (Sn 421). Then, Bimbisāra asks about the Bodhisattva’s identity, but the Bodhisattva does not say he is a king’s son, but merely speaks of his family (Sn 421-423).

Here are the Sutta passages we have mentioned, which give us a good idea of the respective intentions of the 2 young kshatriyas:

(Bimbisāra:)

“Young and tender are you, fair-faced, well-built,	a lad in youth’s first flush, ⁵⁸⁵ of good birth ⁵⁸⁶ —like a kshatriya—	(Sn 420)
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adorning the army’s van, I’ll give you wealth, enjoy it!	at the head of a troop of noble elephants. You who’s asked, pray tell your birth.”	(Sn 421)
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(The Bodhisattva:)

Straight on, O king, there is a country, endowed with wealth and heroism, ⁵⁸⁷ Ādicca ⁵⁸⁹ by clan [of the Solar lineage],	at the foot of the Himalayas, settled amongst the Kosalas. ⁵⁸⁸ Sakya by birth,	(Sn 422)
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⁵⁸⁴ Sn 3.1/405-424 (SD 49.19).

⁵⁸⁵ This line recurs with *patham’uppattito* at J 3:218.9* & 6:25,23*. See SnA 384,11.

⁵⁸⁶ *Jātimā*, “of good birth,” alluding to the Buddha’s kshatriya (*khattiya*) “class,” which is also one of its senses.

⁵⁸⁷ The context hints at a wordplay on *virīya*, “effort, energy,” which is the abstract n of *vīra*, “hero.” Cf n on *vaṇṇ’āroha* (Sn 420c) re: *vīr’āṅga,rūpa*.

⁵⁸⁸ Caillat makes an interesting n: “From ‘vassal’ *stricto sensu* to ‘dependant,’ with various scornful implications, the transition is easy. That this status was sometimes resented seems to result from Sn 422 (SnA); also DPPN 2:971 f” (1974:48 n43, ref standardized). In **Aggañña S** (D 27), the Buddha states that the Sakyas are vassals of Kosala (D 27/3:83), SD 2.19—which is what is hinted at in *kosalassa nīketino* here. On the “marriage alliance” between Pasenadi and the Sakyas, see **Viḍūḍabha Vatthu** (DhA 4.3/1, esp p346-357362; J 4:146-152). Any resentment, however subtle, is not reflective of the Buddha, but rather of how we interpret the passage.

⁵⁸⁹ Be Ce Ee Se so; Be:Ka *ādicco*. On *ādicca*, see Tha:N 127 n26 & Brough 1953:xv. *Gotta*, although usu meaning “clan,” here has the sense of “lineage, ancestry,” since we are certain that the Buddha’s *gotta* is Gotama: see

from that family, have I gone forth, not wishing for any sensual pleasures. (Sn 423)

Having seen the peril in pleasures, seeing renunciation as security,
I will go on with striving:⁵⁹⁰ here, my heart delights. (Sn 424)

11.2.2 Significance of the meeting

11.2.2.1 In such a great city as Rājagaha, the capital of **Magadha**—not unlike an impersonal modern metropolis like ours today—the Bodhisattva did not go unnoticed, especially such a princely figure, even as a renunciant. In fact, the Sutta tells us that the Bodhisattva was noticed by the king, **Bimbisāra**, himself from atop the terrace of his palace. It is not difficult for royalty to read the demeanour of another royal.

Bimbisāra was probably intrigued by the meeting of opposites—an oxymoron—in the Bodhisattva. What first attracted Bimbisāra’s attention must have been Siddhattha’s regal demeanour: a princely figure walking royally on his street. Then, he noticed that it was not a king but a mendicant—which earned his curiosity.

11.2.2.2 There was another explanation—it is possible that they were acquaintances, and Bimbisāra at once noticed something familiar about the renunciant on his almsround. Hence, Bimbisāra was understandably excited to find out if it was really his old friend. This would also explain why he felt confident enough to offer the Bodhisattva such a powerful position, that is, as his commander-in-chief.

In fact, **the Mahā,vaṃsa** (Mahv 2.25-30) tells us that Bimbisāra (who became king at 15) and Gotama (the Bodhisattva) had been playmates. Bimbisāra was 5 years younger than Siddhattha. Bimbisāra’s father, Bhātī, and Siddhattha’s father, Suddhodana, were friends, too. In that case, when the two young kshatriyas met in Rājagaha, Siddhattha was 29 and Bimbisāra 24, and had been king of Magadha for 9 years.

11.2.2.3 The presence of the Bodhisattva in Rājagaha, as described in **the (Sutta Nipāta) Pabbajjā Sutta** (Sn 3.1) [11.2.1.2] and the Commentaries, is also an interesting case of how a person’s charisma—the attribution of special qualities, both human and superhuman—work to enhance the dignity or quality of a person.⁵⁹¹ Since the Bodhisattva does have his own special human and superhuman qualities, we can say that he was a *naturally* charismatic individual. After all, he is the one who will be Buddha.⁵⁹²

11.2.2.4 When the Bodhisattva turned down Bimbisāra’s offer of power and leadership, and on learning the nature of the Bodhisattva’s quest, Bimbisāra solicited a promise from the Bodhisattva to visit Rājagaha *first* after the great awakening. He is recorded in **the Jātaka Nidāna** as saying: “You will surely become Buddha! When you have attained Buddhahood, you should come to my realm first!”⁵⁹³ (J 1:66,29 f).

Comy ad Tha 367 & 1080: *gotamena buddhena, gotama, gottena sammā, sambuddhena, “gotamena buddhena is the fully self-awakened one who is Gotama by clan”* (ThaA 1:201,27; 3:143,12) & *gotamo’ti bhagavantam gottena kitteti*, “the Blessed One is proclaimed by the gotra [clan-name] Gotama”.

⁵⁹⁰ This “striving” (*padhāna*)—the Bodhisattva’s meditations under the 2 teachers, followed by the 6 years of self-mortification—is mentioned in **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26) [13.2.2.1]. The final meditative efforts made by the Bodhisattva just before the great awakening is briefly recorded in **(Sutta Nipāta) Padhāna S** (Sn 3.2), which continues with the account of the Bodhisattva’s struggle for awakening. [16.1.3.2]

⁵⁹¹ See SD 3.14 (4-8).

⁵⁹² On the Bodhisattva’s charisma, see SD 49.19 (5.7.4).

⁵⁹³ *Addhā tvam buddho bhavissasi. Buddha, bhūtena pana te paṭhamam mama vijitam āgantabban’ti.*

Note that Bimbisāra used the word “realm” (*vijita*), which literally means “conquest,” that is, it refers to “lands he has conquered.”

Bimbisāra skillfully expanded Magadha (southern Bihar) in various ways. Kosala, the powerful kingdom of Pasenadi, to the west, he allied by marrying Pasenadi’s sister. Aṅga, to the east, not a very strong state, he conquered. His realm had large areas of fertile rice fields, and access to iron ore and other natural resources in the adjacent forests.

By controlling the river Ganges (Ganga) from about the present-day western border of Bihar to its mouth, he profited from the river commerce of eastern India. He introduced a land-revenue system and an efficient administration and was thus able to support a strong army. Much of his skills in administering his realm was influenced by that of the Achaemenid empire (ancient Persia) under Cyrus II (the Great) (c 600-530 BCE) and Darius I (r 522-486 BCE).

In short, Bimbisāra founded the first great royal dynasty of India, and the territory that he ruled over served as the base of the empires of the subsequent dynasties, especially the Nandas and the Mauryas. It was during the Maurya period that India saw its greatest empire under Asoka (ruled c 268-c 232 BCE).⁵⁹⁴

11.2.2.5 The (Sutta Nipāta) Pabbajjā Sutta says nothing about the Bodhisattva’s promise to visit Rājagaha first. **The Mahāvastu version** (Mvst 2:198-200), which places the visit later, has two verses, one of which contains the request and the other the acceptance. The Sutta Nipāta Commentary (SnA 2:385 f) also mentions the promise and adds that Bimbisāra knows of the prophecy concerning the Bodhisattva.

There is another Mahāvastu passage (Mvst 2:117-120) which says that the Bodhisattva goes straight to Vesāli after leaving home, joining Ālāra, and later visits Udraka (Skt; P *uddaka*) at Rājagaha. There is, however, no mention of Bimbisāra here. Although such accounts seem fragmented, all the events mentioned, however, did occur. Hence, we only need to piece them together with all the data at our disposal.

12 The 2 teachers

12.1 ĀLĀRA AND UDDAKA

12.1.1 The Commentaries only very briefly (in a couple of lines) tell us about the time the Bodhisattva spent with the 2 teachers. Journeying from Rājagaha, the Bodhisattva, in due course, approached Ālāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāma,putta. However, after having achieved their respective attainments, he found them to be unsatisfactory, and concluded: “This is not the way to awakening.”⁵⁹⁵

12.1.2 The Commentaries merely make a very brief note of the 2 teachers [12.1.1] probably because there was nothing miraculous about them. Moreover, the event is well documented in **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26) and elsewhere.⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁹⁴ Thapar 2002:150-156; D Rothermund, “Bimbisāra,” in *Ency of India*, Thomson Gale, 2006 1:154.

⁵⁹⁵ J 1:66:33-35; BA 6,33 f, 286,14-17.

⁵⁹⁶ **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,15-17/1:164-166), SD 1.11; **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,14 f/1:240), SD 49.4; **Bodhi Rāja,-kumāra S** (M 85,11-14/2:93), SD 55.2; **(Deva) Saṅgārava S** (M 100,11 f/2:211 f), SD 10.9. Ālāra is mentioned by his follower, Pukkusa, in **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,4.27), SD 9. Uddaka has a sutta of his own: **Uddaka S** (S 35.103/4:83 f), SD 94.2, where he is said not to have any attainments despite his claims; his riddle is mentioned in **Pāsādika S** (D 29,16/3:126 f), SD 40a.6 & Nakamura 2000:138 f; king Eḷeyya and 6 of his ministers are said to be his followers: **(Cattukka) Vassa,kāra S** (A 4.187,6/2:180), SD 45.6 & AA 4:164. They are also mentioned in **Madhyam’āgama** of the Sarvāstivāda (T26.776b5-777a4); **Vinaya** of the Dharmaguptakas (T1428.780bt-c19); cf J 1:66; DhA 1:85; ApA 71; BA 6; DhsA 34; MahvsT 66.

From Ālāra Kālāma,⁵⁹⁷ the Bodhisattva learned to meditate up to the formless attainment of the base of nothingness (*ākincaññ'āyatana*), where the meditator transcends all sense-objects and mind-objects, and there is nothing, as it were, neither body nor mind.

From Uddaka, the Bodhisattva learned his father Rāma's meditation method. It was a stage higher, that of the formless attainment of the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception (*n'eva,saññā,nā-saññāyatana*), where the consciousness is so subtle that it cannot be said to exist or not exist.

So diligent and successful was the Bodhisattva in his spiritual tasks that both these teachers were, in turn, simply impressed, and each of them invited him to head their respective congregations.⁵⁹⁸ However, both these teachers told the Bodhisattva that there was nothing further regarding meditation that either of them could teach him. Realizing that he had not found the answer to ending suffering, he respectfully declined their offers despite the worldly benefits of being a guru.

To walk away from the highest meditative bliss of his time, and "from the fame and spoils of big-time gurudom,"⁵⁹⁹ required non-identifying (*atammayatā*) [7.1.3.2] with the ways of the world. The Bodhisattva's great determination and single-mindedness in his quest helped him to stay squarely on his quest-path.

12.2 THEIR LOCATIONS

12.2.1 There are a few scholars, not many, who, on account of relatively meagre textual evidence about the 2 teachers, were not convinced of their existence. They thought that their stories were fabricated and interpolated later.⁶⁰⁰ Anyway, no serious scholar of early Buddhism today would doubt the textual tradition supporting this episode of the Bodhisattva and the 2 teachers.

However, there is some difficulty regarding where they were located. The only source of **Ālāra's** location says that he lived in the Vindhya mountains.⁶⁰¹ that is, the Buddha,carita (Buc 7.54). This information, however, is hardly reliable due to Aśvaghōṣa's poetic licence and habit of fabricating facts in his story of the Buddha [2.2.1.21]. The reality is that we have no record of **Uddaka's** location at all.

12.2.2 The Lalita,Vistara (a Sanskrit biography of the Buddha) tells us that Ālāra lived in the countryside. A Chinese source (not in the Āgama collection, that is, T1 or T2), *Fāngguǎng dà zhuāngyán jīng* (方廣大莊嚴經), adds that he had 300 students with him. It was only after the Bodhisattva had visited him that he

⁵⁹⁷ Buddhaghosa says that **Ālāra** was also called Dīgha,piṅgala; **Kālāma** was his family name (DA 2:569 = MA 2:-171).

⁵⁹⁸ See prec n.

⁵⁹⁹ Santikaro 1991:1.

⁶⁰⁰ Those scholars who think that the tradition of the 2 teachers instructing the Bodhisattva was a fabrication incl: André Bareau, *Recherches sur la biographie du Buddha dan les Sutrapitaka et les Vinaya anciens I* (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1963); Tilmann Vetter, *The Ideas and Meditative Practices of Early Buddhism* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1988) & Johannes Bronkhorst, *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 1986; New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993). Those who have argued the episode of the 2 teachers is historical are Ghirgo Zafiropulo, *L'illumination du Buddha: de la quête à l'annonce de l'Éveil: essais de chronologie relative et de stratigraphie textuelle* (Innsbruck: Institut für Sprachwissenschaft der Universität Innsbruck, 1993) & Alexander Wynne, "How old is the Suttapiṭaka?" (St John's College, 2003:22-28 Internet ed).

⁶⁰¹ The distance between Rājagaha and the Vindhya mountains today by [the NH19](#) is about 476 km (295 mi).

went on to Rājagaha and met Bimbisāra. After that, he went to Uddaka, who had 700 students.⁶⁰² Otherwise, we seem to have practically no other information about the 2 teachers.⁶⁰³

13 Striving and self-mortification

13.1 URUVELĀ

13.1.1 From here on, the Bodhisattva story seemed to be less mythical and more historical. Or, the mythical elements were less obvious as we see the Bodhisattva entering a new phase in his quest for awakening. The Commentaries very briefly note that he went to **Senānī, gāma** in Uruvelā. The Buddha, -vaṃsa Commentary then cites **the Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta** (M 26), here quoted in full:

“This is a pleasant spot, a delightful forest grove where a river flows through a pleasant ford, with smooth banks of white sand, and villages all around for alms-resort. This will indeed serve well for the striving of a clansman intent on spiritual effort. ... This is, indeed, conducive for spiritual effort.”⁶⁰⁴

Taking up his dwelling there, the Bodhisattva began the great striving.⁶⁰⁵

13.1.2 There were the 4 sons of the brahmin soothsayers and the brahmin Koṇḍañña as their leader [4.3.1], **the group of 5** (*pañca, vaggiya*) who had gone forth in anticipation of the Bodhisattva’s renunciation and awakening. They were walking for alms through the villages, market-towns and cities, when they came upon the Bodhisattva at Uruvelā.

They were his constant companions and attendants during the 6 years of the great striving. They served him, attending to various duties, such as sweeping the cell and compound, and so forth, thinking, “Now he will become a Buddha! Now he will become a Buddha!”⁶⁰⁶

13.2 THE GREAT STRIVING

13.2.1 Self-mortification

13.2.1.1 The Bodhisattva was determined to practise austerities in their most extreme form (*koṭi-p, -patta*) until his goal was attained (*koṭi-p, patta*).⁶⁰⁷ He began to take only one grain of sesamum, or of rice, a day. Then, he took to complete fasting. When the devas wanted to infuse ambrosia (*ojā*) through the pores of his skin, he dissuaded them.

Because he took no food, his body became exceedingly emaciated: his golden complexion became dark, and the 32 marks of the great man were obliterated. Then, overcome by severe pain while engaging in breathingless meditation, he fell down unconscious at the edge of the walk-path (*caṅkamana*).⁶⁰⁸ [18.4.5.3]

⁶⁰² Fang-kuang ta-chuang-yen-ching, fasc 7 (T187/T3.57c-80). As for Chinese Buddhist sources, the Āgama collection (T1+T2) are generally more reliable than those in the rest of the Chinese canon.

⁶⁰³ Nakamura is skeptical of these locations of the 2 teachers because “the distances involved are too great,” and thinks that since the meeting with Bimbisāra was in Rājagaha and the awakening in Bodhgayā, the 2 teachers probably lived somewhere near either of the 2 places, ie, in southern Bihar, south of the Ganges (2000:127).

⁶⁰⁴ M 26,17/1:167 (SD 1.11).

⁶⁰⁵ J 1:67,1-4; BA 286:17-21.

⁶⁰⁶ J 1:67,5-10; BA 6,35-37, 286:21-25.

⁶⁰⁷ Both the sense of *koṭi-p, patta* are used here. This is a case of Pali polysemy: see SD 1.1 (4.4.5); SD 10.16 (1.3.1-1.3.2).

⁶⁰⁸ This is the ambulatory (uncovered) or cloister (covered) used for walking exercise or walking meditation.

13.2.1.2 When he fell unconscious, some of the devas declared: “The recluse Gotama is dead!” While others declared: “This is how the arhats abide!” Those devas who thought the Bodhisattva was dead, rushed to Suddhodana and announced, “Your son is dead!”

“Did he die before awakening or after?”

“He was unable to become buddha. He fell down at the place of his exertion and died.”

Hearing this, Suddhodana refused to believe the devas, retorting,

“I don’t believe it. Death cannot come to him before his attainment of awakening!”

Why did Suddhodana not believe the news of Siddhattha’s alleged death? (asked the Commentator). Because Suddhodana had seen the miracles on the visit of Kāḷa,devala (Asita) who worshipped the child Bodhisattva [4.1], and also the Bodhisattva meditating in the unmoving shadow of the jambul-tree [5.1.2.2].⁶⁰⁹

13.2.1.3 The world must know of the Bodhisattva’s progress: the devas were the best media since they easily traversed any distance through the air—although, like our media today, not always totally correct. Like various daily papers, they each reacted in their own way to what they saw of the Bodhisattva, and reported accordingly to Suddhodana, who now knew his son, Siddhattha, better. He seemed resigned to his son’s destiny, and clearly desired his son’s wellbeing. He was even certain that Siddhattha would attain his goal of awakening.

Suddhodana was right. When Siddhattha came to and was able to stand up, the watchful devas came back and told him: “Maharajah, your son is well!”

Suddhodana replied: “I know very well that my son cannot die just like that!”⁶¹⁰

Gotama’s erstwhile mother—reborn as the male Tusita deva Māyā—too, came to him to encourage him, even though he did not need any encouragement. Upon regaining consciousness, he knew what he had done, and what to do next.

13.2.2 The middle way

13.2.2.1 When the great being (*mahā,satta*)—as Siddhattha is often called in the Jātaka Nidāna—was practising severe and extreme austerities for 6 years in Uruvelā, it was to him like trying to tie the skies in knots. He had already mastered all the 8 dhyanas—the 4 form dhyanas and the 4 formless dhyanas. This was as far as the contemplative tradition of his day went.

Now he needed to systematically try out the other tradition of the day—that of **self-mortification**, of freeing the “soul,” as it were, from the prison that was the body. It should be noted that nowhere in the texts or commentaries was he ever represented as believing in any kind of divine essence or “soul” (*attā*; Skt *ātman*): he just kept an open mind in his quest.⁶¹¹

Having practised self-mortification “to its very end” [13.2.1.1], he did not find himself any nearer his goal. In fact, it nearly brought him death, not awakening. His imminent death only made him realize that **self-mortification was not the path to awakening.**

He must have a healthy body in order to support a healthy mind. He went about gathering almsfood in the village and market-town. He reverted to taking solid food to regain his strength and health. Having regained his health, his 32 marks of the great man reappeared on him, and his complexion was golden again.⁶¹²

⁶⁰⁹ J 1:67,10-24. BA omits this section.

⁶¹⁰ J 1:67,24-26.

⁶¹¹ Details of the self-mortification can be found in **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,17-30:242-246), SD 1.12, and **Mahā Sīha,nāda S** (M 12,44-63/1:77-83), SD 1.13.

⁶¹² J 1:67,26-31; BA 286,29-33.

13.2.2.2 This was such a crucial moment in the Bodhisattva's life that the devas must intervene, or perhaps the story-tellers felt that a vital point must be made [18.4.5.3]. **The Paṭhama Sambodhi** (*Pathosom-pho:d*)—a Siamese Buddha biography by Paramanujit Jinorasa [1.0.1.1(6)]—contains a powerful dramatization of this episode, as depicted on a temple-wall painting [Fig 13.2.2].

While the Bodhisattva was recovering from his collapse due to severe fasting and physical exhaustion, Sakra, lord of Tāvātimsa, raced down to appear before him with a 3-string veena. The first string was strung taut and broke at the touch; the last string was so loose it made a poor sound. This middle string, properly tuned, gave just the right tone.

Fair goes the dancing when the sitar's tuned,
Tune us the sitar neither low or high,
And we will dance away the hearts of men.

The string o'erstretched breaks, and the music
flies,
The string o'erslack is dumb, and the music dies;
Tune us the sitar neither low nor high.⁶¹³

We have here an echo of sutta teachings, especially **the Soṇa Koḷivīsa Thera, gāthā** (Tha 638) and **the Soṇa Koliṅga Sutta** (A 6.55).⁶¹⁴ The question now is what did the Bodhisattva think about this, and what did he do next?

13.2.3 A pleasure that is wholesome

13.2.3.1 At Uruvelā, the group of 5 monks were the Bodhisattva's companions and attendants. However, after realizing the folly of extreme asceticism, he decided to abandon it, and started again to take normal almsfood. The group of 5 monks, being unawakened, misconstrued the Bodhisattva's natural and wise strategy, and thought:

“Even though he has practised extreme austerities for 6 years, he has not been able to realize omniscience (*sabbaññū*) [4.4.1]. How will he be able to do so *now* that he has started taking solid food again, going on almsround in the village? He now leads a life of pleasure and has turned away from his striving. Our expectation of spiritual attainments under him is like one who wishes to bathe by using dew-drops! Of what use is he to us now?”

Thereupon, the group of 5, disappointed with the Bodhisattva, each taking his almsbowl and robes, left. They walked a distance of 18 yojanas and reached the deer park at Isipatana, where they practised on their own.⁶¹⁵



Fig 13.2.2. The lesson of the 3 strings. Sakra plays a 3-stringed *phin* (Siamese *vīṇā*), watched by the 5 monks. Wat Rajasiddharam, Dhonburi. (Picture 19, *The Life of the Buddha according to Thai temple paintings*, USIS, 1959.)

⁶¹³ Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia*, 1879: bk 6.

⁶¹⁴ Tha 638 (SD 44.8); A 6.55, 1.4/3:375 (SD 20.12). See also V 1:182 f. For another lute parable (on the nature of sense-objects), see **Vin'opama S** (S 35.246/4:197 f), SD 91.15.

⁶¹⁵ J 1:31-68,5; BA 286,33-38.

13.2.3.2 The 5 monks' abandoning the Bodhisattva when he was closest to attaining awakening is ironic, yet unexpected. It was ironic because their leader, Koṇḍañña, was the only brahmin soothsayer at the naming ceremony who raised only one finger, absolutely certain that the Bodhisattva would become buddha.

But now, when the Bodhisattva was just days away from attaining awakening, he left the Bodhisattva with the other 4 monks. Obviously, his faith had run out, or that he actually began to doubt his own prophecy. Either way, his disappointment was understandable.

A more important lesson for us, however, is that when we—like the Bodhisattva—have a vital decision to make or are faced with a great challenge, we are likely to be abandoned by those we thought had faith in us or had supported us. However, even our best friends and strongest supporters may not be wise enough to fully understand our own struggle.

The reality is that we are, as a rule, alone, and should not fear *aleness* when we reach a crucial moment in our life. This is the moment that defines us or the moment of life-changing discovery—and like the Bodhisattva renouncing the world in the dark of night [10.3.2]—no one may understand when we must make a very important decision in our life or take a new turn. Yet, in this crucial moment, we are not really alone: we have the Buddha, sitting joyfully alone and radiant under the Bodhi tree as our inspiration and guide.⁶¹⁶

13.2.3.3 At this point in the Bodhisattva's quest, he realized that neither the devotion to sense-pleasures nor the practice of self-mortification could bring him any spiritual liberation. The answer clearly lies beyond these two extremes, and so he no more identified with them—he had nothing to do with them at all (*atammayatā*) [16.3.3].

Now that he had found his way back on track, he recalled the 1st dhyana that he had blissfully enjoyed as a child during the ploughing festival. He was now certain that the answer lies in the breath-meditation that he had practised. **The Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36) states the significance of this realization:

“Then, following on that memory,⁶¹⁷ I realized, ‘That is the path to awakening!’

I thought thus, ‘Why do I fear the pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states?’ I thought thus, ‘I do not fear the pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states!’⁶¹⁸ (M 36,31-32/1:246 f), SD 1.12

A similar sentiment is found in **the Laṭṭikōpama Sutta** (M 66), reminding us not to fear the bliss of dhyana, for:

“This is called the bliss of renunciation, the bliss of seclusion, the bliss of stillness, the bliss of self-awakening—it should be pursued, cultivated, developed. This pleasure should not be feared, I say!” (M 66,21/1:454), SD 28.11

Thus, abandoning both the extremes of sensual pleasures and self-mortification, the Bodhisattva turned to “Dharma-inspired pleasure.”⁶¹⁹ In due course, the Bodhisattva becomes the Buddha.

⁶¹⁶ On overcoming fear in solitary ascetic practice: **Bhaya Bherava S** (M 4/1:16-24), SD 44.3.

⁶¹⁷ That is, regarding the mindfulness of the in-and-out-breaths (MA 2:291).

⁶¹⁸ On the two kinds of pleasures—sensual pleasure and the pleasure of awakening—see **Araṇa Vibhaṅga S** (M 1:39.9/3:233). On the pleasure experienced by the awakened mind, see **Uṇṇābha S** (S 51.15), SD 10.11.

⁶¹⁹ See **Deva,daha S** (M 101,16/2:224), SD 18.4.

13.2.4 The 5 dreams

13.2.4.1 On the night before the Vesākha (May-June) full-moon—the day of Sujātā’s meal-offering and the day of the great awakening [14.1.1]—the Bodhisattva had 5 dreams. This episode is not found in the Commentaries, but in **the Mahā Supina Sutta** (A 5.196)⁶²⁰ and **the Mahāvastu** (Mvst 2:136). **The 5 great dreams** are as follows (abridged):

- (1) He dreamed that this great earth was his bedstead; the Himalaya, king of mountains, was his pillow; his left hand rested on the eastern ocean, his right hand on the western ocean, and his two feet on the southern sea.
- (2) He dreamed that *tiriya* grass grew out of his navel and rose up until it reached the sky.
- (3) He dreamed that white worms with black heads crawled up from his feet to his knees, covering them.
- (4) He dreamed that 4 birds of different colors, each coming from one of the 4 quarters, fell at his feet, and turned all white.
- (5) He dreamed that he climbed up a huge mountain of dung without being soiled by it.

A 5.196/3:240 (SD 63.13)

13.2.4.2 In the same Sutta (A 5.196) [13.2.4.1], the Buddha interpreted his own dreams as follows:

- (1) The 1st dream, says the Buddha, portends that he will awaken to the supreme full self-awakening.
- (2) The 2nd dream portends that he will awaken to the noble eightfold path and will proclaim it well among devas and humans.
- (3) The 3rd dream portends that numerous white-robed householders would go for life-long refuge to the Tathagata.
- (4) The 4th dream portends that members of the 4 classes—kshatriyas, brahmins, vaishyas and shudras⁶²¹—will go forth from the household life into homelessness in the Dhamma and Vinaya taught by the Tathagata and attain supreme liberation.
- (5) The 5th dream portends that he will receive robes, almsfood, dwellings and medicines, support and necessities for the sick, and he will use them without being attached to them, infatuated with them, not overwhelmed by them, but seeing their danger and knowing the escape.

A 5.196/3:240 (SD 63.13)

13.2.4.3 Dreams often have a kind of “wish-fulfilling prophecy”: what we wish for and often think about may appear in our dreams. Such dreams are, in turn, regarded as legitimizing our wishes, whatever they may be. This was a well-known practice in Chinese Buddhism during the imperial times, when the dreamer believed that this was direct communication from the Buddha. Hence, they believed, it should be regarded as a “sutra” (*jīng*). Such texts are at best apocryphal works, at worst spurious fabrications. Since the Buddha is “in nirvana,” clearly, the dreamer’s “Buddha” must be a wishful figment.⁶²²

The Commentary to **the Mahā Supina Sutta** (A 5.196) tells us that there are 4 causes of dreams:

- (1) disturbance of the bodily elements (*dhātu-k, khoba*), producing dreams such as falling from a precipice or flying or being chased by a beast or a thief;
- (2) previous events (*anubhūta, pubba*);

⁶²⁰ A 5.196/3:240 (SD 63.13).

⁶²¹ Loosely, these would be the ruling class or nobles, the religious or teaching profession, the entrepreneurs or business class, and the working class.

⁶²² See **How Buddhism became Chinese**, SD 40b.3 (3.4.4).

- (3) divine possession (*devatôpasamhāra*), but devas can bring thoughts both for one's good or otherwise; and
 (4) premonitions (*pubba,nimitta*). (AA 3:316)

The Commentator explains that dreams arising from the first two causes, as a rule, do not come true. While the first is rooted in physiological factors, the second is psychological, that is, induced by constant recall of the past. A dream that is induced by divine beings has various dream-objects that may be wholesome or unwholesome.

The last, premonitions, may be beneficial or not, depending on one's merits or lack of them. This is the kind of dream that occurred to Mahā Māyā (the 6-tusked elephant) on her conception [2], the 16 dreams of the Kosala king, and the Bodhisattva's 5 dreams [13.2.4.1].

It also should be noted the Buddha and the arhats do not dream since they have full control of their minds. The 4 kinds of dreams only occur to learners and worldlings, that is, those who have not yet overcome the 3 perversions (*vipallāsa*) [8.3.3.1 n], that is, the unawakened. The arhats do not dream because they have uprooted the 3 perversions. (AA 3:317)

The Bodhisattva, being still unawakened, may have dreams. In this case, his dreams are fore signs of things to come that is, his becoming the Buddha.⁶²³

[14 The Bodhisattva's last meal](#)

[14.1 SUJĀTĀ](#)

[14.1.1 The milk-rice](#)

14.1.1.1 On the full-moon day of Vesākha (May-June), the Bodhisattva went to **Senānī,gāma**. There, a maiden named **Sujātā**, born of the family of the householder Senāni of the market-town of Senānī (*senāni,nigāma*),⁶²⁴ in Uruvelā, had reached her years of discretion. She made a wish at a banyan tree:

“If I were to marry a member of a family of equal rank, and succeed in obtaining a son as my first child, I will make to you an annual sacrifice, costing a hundred thousand.”

Her wish was fulfilled, and she decided to make her votive offering on the full-moon day of Vesākha (May-June), the very day of the completion of the 6 years of the great being's practice of austerities. To prepare her offering, she first of all sent a thousand cows to pasture in a grove of liquorice. She then made 500 of them drink their milk, and then made 250 drink that. In this manner, she brought the number to the last 16, whose milk 8 cows were made to drink. She made the milk go in this cycle in order to obtain just the right thickness, sweetness and strength.

Thinking that she would make the offering at dawn on the full-moon day of Vesākha, she rose early and milked the 8 cows. That day, the calves did not go near the cows' udders. The moment the new vessels were placed under the udders, streams of milk streamed out into them on their own accord. Seeing this miracle, Sujātā herself took the milk and poured it into a new pot. Then, with her own hands, started a fire and began to boil **milk-rice** (*pāyasa*).

⁶²³ For another traditional view of dreams, see Miln 297-301.

⁶²⁴ J 1:68,6 = BA 286,38. The name seems orig to have been *Senā,nigama* or *Senāni,gāma* (eg, V 1:21; M 1:166, 240; S 1:106). Buddhaghosa himself is not certain of the spelling. He says that it was so called because either (1) it was a village (*gāma*) occupied by soldiers (*senā* or *senāni*) at the beginning of the world-cycle (*paṭhama,kappikānam senāya niviṭṭh'okāse patiṭṭhita,gāmo*) or (2) it was the market-town of Sujātā's father Senānī (*sujātāya vā pitu senānī nāma nigamo*) (MA 2:173; SA 1:172).

When the milk-rice was boiling, large bubbles arose and ran around, turning sunwise. Not a drop was spilled. There was not even the slightest smoke from the hearth: after all, it was Sakra who had brought the fire-wood, put it together and started the fire. The 4 world-guardians came and placed guards over the fire-place, and Mahā Brahmā held a parasol over it.

The devas and the deities of the 4 great continents and their surrounding 2000 islands, by their divine power—as though extracting honey by squeezing out a honey-comb on a stick—placed ambrosia into the milk-rice. (At other times, the devas infused ambrosia at each mouthful, that is, as the food was taken, but on the day of the great awakening and of the day of final passing-away into nirvana, they infused it into the vessel itself.)⁶²⁵

14.1.2 The “tree-deity” Bodhisattva

14.1.2.1 On that very same day (the Vesākha full-moon), early at dawn, the Bodhisattva, having attended to his bodily needs, while waiting for the time for his almsround, went to the foot of that banyan tree and sat down. Then, Sujātā’s slave woman and wet nurse, **Puṇṇā**, went to the banyan tree to prepare the ground at the foot of the tree for the offering. She saw the Bodhisattva, surveying the eastern quarter, resplendent like the sun.⁶²⁶

His body glowed like the golden radiance of sunset over the mountain-peaks, as if taunting the deep dawn darkness, and shone like a forest of lotuses as the sun breaks through the high rocky clefts. As the Bodhisattva’s bodily radiance lit up the whole banyan tree with a golden glow, it occurred to Puṇṇā:

“Our deity (*devatā*) has come down from the tree today, and is sitting here ready to accept the oblation with his own hands!”

Swiftly she ran to Sujātā and excitedly reported the matter to her.⁶²⁷

14.1.2.2 Sujātā, joyful faith arising in her heart, adorned herself with all her ornaments. Taking **the milk-rice**, sweet like honey, from the cooking pot she poured it out into a golden bowl, worth a hundred thousand. The milk-rice, of exquisite sweetness, flowed out into the bowl full to the brim, like water off a lotus-leaf. She covered the bowl with another golden vessel, and then wrapped them in a clean piece of cloth. Placing the bowl on her head, she went towards the banyan tree.

From afar, she saw the Bodhisattva, sitting like a tree-deity, his bodily radiance lighting up the whole banyan tree with a golden glow, like a pile of merits. Taking the Bodhisattva to be the tree-deity she had promised a votive offering, Sujātā was overcome with faith and ecstasy. Moving forward, she constantly slightly bowed joyfully.

Then, she stopped and took the golden bowl down from her head and placed it in a golden water-pot fragrant with sweet-smelling flowers. She walked up to the Bodhisattva and stood near him. The earthen bowl given by Mahā Brahmā Ghaṭīkara which had been with the Bodhisattva all this while disappeared at that very moment.

Not finding a bowl, the Bodhisattva stretched forth his right hand and Sujātā poured the water of dedication (*dakkhiṇ’odaka*) over it.⁶²⁸ Then, she placed the bowl of milk-rice along with its outer container in the great being’s hand. The great being gazed at Sujātā, and she understood what it meant.

She respectfully made the 5-pointed prostration,⁶²⁹ and said, “Noble one, accept what I have offered and go wherever you wish. Just as my wish has been fulfilled, may yours be fulfilled, too!” (*yathā mama*

⁶²⁵ J 1:68,5-32; BA 7,1-18, 286,38-287,7.

⁶²⁶ Puṇṇā is mentioned at J 1:68; ApA 73.

⁶²⁷ BA 7,7-18.

⁶²⁸ “Water of dedication” (*dakkhiṇ’odaka*): see **Doṇa Brāhmaṇa S** (A 5.192,4.5/3:226) n, SD 36.14.

⁶²⁹ “The 5-pointed prostration” (*pañca,paṭiṭṭhita* or *pañc’aṅga,paṭiṭṭhita*, “the 5-limbed array”) is a traditional bow expressing full respect: the 5 points are the 2 knees, the 2 elbows, and the forehead on the hands (spread

manoratho nipphanno evaṃ tumhākaṃ pi nipphajjātūti). Then, she left without a thought for the golden bowl worth a hundred thousand than for a withered leaf.⁶³⁰

14.1.2.3 Sujātā's offering was the Bodhisattva's last meal before his awakening. After the great awakening, the Buddha did not take any solid food for 49 days (7 weeks).⁶³¹ Sujātā's meal was considered *one of the 2 most important meal-offerings to the Buddha*: hers is the last meal before the great awakening, and Cunda the smith's offering is the last meal before the final nirvana.⁶³² Hence, the devas infused ambrosia (*oja*)—here, it means “divine flavour”—into them⁶³³ [14.1.1.1].

14.1.2.4 The youth **Yasa** was Sujātā's son. When he attained arhathood, his father, who had come in search of him, became the Buddha's follower and invited him to a meal. The Buddha accepted the invitation and went with Yasa to the house. During the Buddha's teaching at the end of the meal, both Sujātā and Yasa's wife became streamwinners.⁶³⁴

On the same day, Sujātā took the 3 refuges,⁶³⁵ and so became the foremost among laywomen who have gone to the 3 refuges.⁶³⁶ She had made an earnest resolve to attain this eminence in the time of Padum'uttara Buddha.⁶³⁷

14.2 Against the current

14.2.1 The Bodhisattva then rose from his seat and went around the banyan tree sunwise. Taking the bowl of milk-rice with him, he headed for the bank of the river Nerañjarā. He went to the Suppatitṭha ford (so called because it was easily accessible), the bathing place of bodhisattvas on the day of their attainment of awakening.

Leaving the golden bowl filled with alms-food on the bank, he went down into the river and bathed. Then, having emerged, he donned the banner of the arhats [10.4.1], the robe worn by all the buddhas. Having sat down facing the east, he was ready to eat the honeyed milk-rice, which had been prepared without any water (with only milk and honey). He first divided the milk-rice into 49 balls, each the size of the kernel of a ripe palmyra fruit.⁶³⁸

That was all the food he had for the next 49 days of the 7 weeks he spent after his awakening at the foot of the Bodhi-tree or its vicinity. During this period, he took no other food; he neither bathed nor washed his mouth, nor rid himself of bodily waste.⁶³⁹ He spent his time in the dhyanic bliss of the path and its fruition.⁶⁴⁰

flat on the ground) (*pāda, jāṇu kappara hattha sīsa, saṅkhātāni pañca aṅgāni samam katvā*, DAaT:Be 2:18). Alluded to at DA 1:145; MA 5:37; AA 1:150; KhpA 150; UA 88; SnA 1:293, 300, 436, 501; J 4:368; VvA 6. See PED 388.

⁶³⁰ J 1:68,32-70,3; BA 7,18-27.

⁶³¹ VA 5:1119; J 1:68 f; UA 406.

⁶³² DA 2:572.

⁶³³ Lalita, vistara (Lalv 334-7 [267-70]) mentions 10 girls in all who provide the Bodhisattva with food during his austerities. Divyāvadāna mentions two persons, Nandā and Nanda, balā, offering him a meal at that time (Divy 392).

⁶³⁴ AA 1:404.

⁶³⁵ AA 1:404.

⁶³⁶ *Aggaṃ upāsikānaṃ pathamaṃ saranaṃ gacchantīnaṃ*. A 1:26; D 2:135; SnA 1:154.

⁶³⁷ AA 1:401.

⁶³⁸ *Ek'aṭṭhi, tāla, pakka-p, pamāṇe*. The palmyra (*tāla*) is *Borassus flabelliformis*.

⁶³⁹ *Ettakaṃ kālaṃ n'eva añño āhāro atthi na nahānaṃ na mukha, dhovanaṃ na sarīra, valañño*.

⁶⁴⁰ J 1:70,3-13; BA 7,28-31.

14.2.2 We are now approaching the glorious moment of the great awakening. Indeed, it is the day of the awakening itself. It began the night before with the 5 great dreams of the Bodhisattva [13.2.4], then came dawn when Sujātā offered the last meal to the Bodhisattva (his next meal would be as the Buddha). And now the Bodhisattva, having washed his bowl (given by Sujātā), let it find its way into the abode of the naga-king, guardian of the bowls of the preceding three buddhas of this auspicious epoch (*bhadda,-kappa*), that is, Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana and Kassapa.⁶⁴¹

The **naga** (*nāga*) is a mythical being inhabiting the bowels of the earth and its waters, which is the mythical realm, that is the depths of our consciousness—our good past karma, and how we think and feel. Here, the naga-king dwells in the depths of the waters, guarding the bowls of the past buddhas. This symbolizes the continuity of buddhas in our epoch. We are fortunate to have 5 buddhas in our epoch: Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana, Kassapa, Gotama and the next buddha, Metteyya [2.1.1.3 n].

The golden bowl (*patta*) represents the world that the Bodhisattva is leaving behind and a movement forward towards awakening. Placing the bowl onto the river current signifies the renunciation of worldliness, and yet the presence of awakening and the opportunity for awakening *in* the world. The alms-bowl represents the connection between the Buddha and the world, between awakening and the yet-to-be-awakened.

The bowls in the Nāga world also represent **the Buddha Dharma** (*buddha, dhamma*), the teaching and truth of self-awakening and freedom—of the continuity and sameness of the true teaching. Gotama (Siddhattha’s clan-name), like the other 3 buddhas before him, all teach the same Dharma. Even after they have attained final nirvana, the Dharma remains in the world—the truths of impermanence, suffering and non-self are immanent in the world whether buddhas arise or not. However, with the presence of the Buddha, he facilitates our understanding of these vital truths so that we are freed from suffering.

The bowls all look alike: all the buddhas discover the same Dharma, and they declare the same noble eightfold path leading to the same freedom. Those who follow the Buddha’s teaching, and are freed as a result—the arhats—are freed in the same way. The only difference is the arhats (and the other saints) are followers of the Buddha. There is no difference in their awakening—this is a key teaching that sets early Buddhism apart from the later sectarian teachings.⁶⁴²

14.2.3 Having eaten the milk-rice, he took the golden bowl to **the river Nerañjarā** and set it adrift, declaring: “If I will succeed in becoming buddha today, let this bowl go upstream. If not, let it go down with the current.” The bowl, cutting its way through the water, moved to the middle of the river, and went on against the current, keeping midstream, going as fast as a swift horse, as far as 80 cubits.⁶⁴³

Then, sinking into a whirlpool, it descended into the abode of the nāga-king Kāla, and making a clinking sound (*kili kilīti*),⁶⁴⁴ as it struck against the bowls used by the three previous buddhas, rested at the bottom of the three bowls. On hearing that sound, the nāga-king began to sing praises of the buddhas in many hundreds of verses, beginning: “A buddha was born only yesterday, and again another today!” For, to him, the time that the great earth took to rise, filling the sky as far as a yojana and 3 gavutas,⁶⁴⁵ was like yesterday and today.

The Bodhisattva spent the day-rest in the Fortunate Forest Grove (*bhadra, vana, saṅḍa*), a blossoming sal-grove on the Nerañjarā bank, passing the day there in the 8 meditative attainments. After that, he rose like a lion shaking off his drowsiness, walked towards the Bodhi-tree in the early evening. This was the time when flowers fell off their stems, along the path 8 usabhas wide [6.2.1.3] and decorated by the

⁶⁴¹ On the buddhas of our epoch, see SD 36.2 (5.9).

⁶⁴² See **Sambuddha S** (S 22.58), SD 49.10.

⁶⁴³ Conservatively, this distance would be about 18.4 m (80 x 23 cm) or 20 yd. [6.2.1.3]

⁶⁴⁴ There is a wordplay here on *kilikilā*, “shouting for joy” (J 5:203; Avadṣ 1.48; Mvst 3.312; Divy 459). See PED: *kilikilāyati*.

⁶⁴⁵ On *yojana* and *gavuta*, see (2.2.1.10) n.

devas. Nagas, yakshas, suparnas and others honoured him with heavenly scents, flowers and so forth, and playing divine music. The 10,000 world-systems were also filled with the scents and garlands, and shouts of joy.⁶⁴⁶

15 The Bodhi tree

15.1 SOTTHIYA

15.1.1 The gift of grass. Siddhattha spent the rest of the day in a sal-grove. In the evening, he walked towards the Bodhi-tree, accompanied by various devas and non-humans. Along the way, he met the brahmin **Sotthiya**, a grass-cutter, coming from the opposite direction. Sotthiya, who was able to read the signs of the great man (*mahā, purisa*), noticed Siddhattha. Seizing this unique opportunity, he at once gave 8 handfuls of *kusa* grass⁶⁴⁷ to Siddhattha to sit on during his meditation. Siddhattha accepted the gift of grass.⁶⁴⁸

15.1.2 Giving the present. Upon meeting Siddhattha, Sotthiya recognized him as **the great man**—in this case, one destined for awakening, the Bodhisattva. It was unlikely that he actually knew that Siddhattha would be Buddha that day and it was unlikely that Siddhattha would have told him so. Anyway, there is no more record about Sotthiya other than this account. This practice of generosity is that of giving what we have here and now that would directly benefit the recipient. Interestingly, Sotthiya was the last human that Siddhattha met before his awakening.

15.2 THE BODHI SEAT

15.2.1 Selecting the direction of awakening

15.2.1.1 Taking the grass given by Sotthiya, the Bodhisattva ascended the Bodhi-compound (we must imagine the Bodhi stood on some high flat ground). The Bodhisattva stood at the foot of the Bodhi tree on the south side (in the eastern quarter), facing north (*dakkhiṇa, disā, bhāge uttarābhimukho*). The earth seemed to tremble like a drop of water on a lotus leaf. The southern ridge of the world sank low almost, as it were, reaching Avīci hell itself, and the northern ridge rose upward as if piercing the vault of heaven itself. (Clearly here, the story-tellers imagined the earth was flat!) The Bodhisattva knew this was not the right spot for his attaining of awakening.

Then, he went in a sunwise direction and stood in the western quarter, facing the east (*pacchima, disā, bhāge gantvā puratthābhimukho*)—the world seemed to tilt in the other way. Then, he stood in the northern quarter, facing the south (*uttara, disā, bhāgarā ... dakkhiṇābhimukho*), with the same effect on the world. Finally, he stood in the eastern quarter, **facing the west** (*puratthima, disā, bhāgarā ... pacchima, abhimukho*). It neither trembled nor shook—it is the meditation seat of all buddhas.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁶ J 1:70,14-30; BA 287,1-5.

⁶⁴⁷ *Kusa* (“sharp,” cf *kusala*, “skilful”), kusha grass (*Poa cynosuroides*), also called *dabbha* (Skt *dharba*); a grass with long pointed stalks (MW); a kind of tussock grass. Used in brahminical ceremonies and sacrifices: see **Kūṭa, -danta S** (D 5,18/1:141) n, SD 22.8. Used by kshatriya warriors on their head-gear to signify fighting without retreat (to the death).

⁶⁴⁸ J 1:70,30-32; BA 287,7-10.

⁶⁴⁹ J 1:70,32-71,27.

15.2.1.2 This description of the direction that the Bodhisattva faced—the west—is unique to the Jātaka Nidāna passage here. All other passages, both in the suttas and the Commentaries, describe the Buddha, as a rule, as **sitting facing the east**, especially when meditating or teaching. Even the main Buddha image in traditional temples—such as those in Thailand—are “oriented”: they face the east, and the main entrance of such a temple is also in the east wall.

It is unlikely that the Jātaka Nidāna description here is wrong. Rather, they seemed to see the cardinal quarters in a different manner. The narrator is probably envisioning the world-disc whose directions were identified not from the centre where the Bodhi-tree was, but at the horizon. These were “horizontal” quarters: east, south, west and north were all on the horizon, the earth’s edge.

Hence, the directions, in such a system, are relative to where one is standing. If we stand in the western quarter—“before” the west (*pacchimâbhimukha*)—we face the eastern quarter (*puratthima, disā, bhāga*). When we stand in the northern quarter—“before” the south—we face the southern quarter.

To resolve the anomalous Jātaka Nidāna passage—with the support of its parallel passage in **the Buddhavaṃsa Commentary**—we should re-translate the directional phrases of the Jātaka Nidāna as follows:

<i>dakkhiṇa, disā, bhāge uttarâbhimukho</i>	“before the north, in the south quarter” (facing south);
<i>pacchima, disā, bhāge ... puratthâbhimukho</i>	“before the east, in the western quarter” (facing west);
<i>uttara, disā, bhāgaṃ ... dakkhiṇâbhimukho</i>	“before the south, in the northern quarter” (facing north);
<i>puratthima, disā, bhāgaṃ ... pacchimâbhimukho</i>	“before the west, in the eastern quarter” (facing east).

In fact, we see just this description in **the Buddhavaṃsa Commentary** parallel passage, thus:

He accepted them [Sotthiya’s offering of grass], ascended the vicinity (*maṇḍapa*) of the Bodhi-tree and stood in the southern quarter. But the spot trembled like a drop of water on a lotus leaf: it was unable to bear the Bodhisattva’s virtues. He went to the western quarter—it trembled just as before. He went to the northern quarter, and it trembled just as before. Then, he went on to **the eastern quarter**—here was a steady spot for the Bodhisattva’s cross-legged posture. This was the spot for the destruction of the defilements. (BA 7,37-8,5) [15.2.2]

15.2.1.3 The same description of **the Buddha’s east-facing seating** is recorded in the following places and suttas:⁶⁵⁰

Saṅgīti Sutta (D 33)	in the Ubbhāṭaka (the new meeting-hall of the Mallas at Pāvā); ⁶⁵¹
Sekha Sutta (M 53)	in the new mote-hall at Kapila, vatthu; ⁶⁵²
Avassuta Pariyāya Sutta (S 35.243)	in the new mote-hall at Kapila, vatthu. ⁶⁵³

The Pabbajjā Sutta (Sn 3.1) phrase, “(the Buddha) headed for Paṇḍava” (*paṇḍavaṃ abhihāresi*, Sn 41c), is explained by its Commentary as meaning that he is residing “on the Paṇḍava east-facing slope” (*paṇḍavassa upari puratthâbhimukha, pabbhāre’ti*).⁶⁵⁴ We can also translate this phrase as “on the eastern slope of Paṇḍava.”

⁶⁵⁰ The Bodhisattva is described as sitting on a Dharma-seat facing east: DA 2:436; MA 4:181; Sāriputta sits facing east before a Dharma gathering of 500 monks (AA 2:126).

⁶⁵¹ D 33,1.2/3:207.

⁶⁵² M 53,4/1:354 (SD 21.14).

⁶⁵³ S 35.243/4:182.

⁶⁵⁴ SnA 2:384, also J 1:66.

The Commentaries tell us that the Bodhisattva sits in **the eastern quarter “facing the west”** [15.2.11]. At first glance, especially from our modern perspective, these directions are odd, even against the textual descriptions.

Traditionally, the Buddha sits **“facing the east”** (*puratthâbhimukho*), especially when meditating in the forest. This naturally stands to logic. A meditator sitting *facing the east*, that is, sunward, will not only face the gathering glow of the rising sun, but also pleasantly feel its growing warmth in the morning cold.

Further, in **the Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2), as Ajāta,sattu approaches the Dharma assembly, the Buddha is described as “sitting against the middle pillar, facing the east, before the community of monks” (*majjhimanî thambhamî nissāya puratthâbhimukho nisinno purakkhato bhikkhu,saṅghassâ ti*).⁶⁵⁵ The Buddha sits facing east, and facing the congregation.

The Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta (D 16) similarly records that in the rest-house at Pāṭali,gāma, the Buddha “sits down facing the east, with his back against the central pillar,” and the elders sit facing the west, that is, the Buddha.⁶⁵⁶ This passage recurs in **the Pāṭaligāmiya Sutta** (U 8.6/86) and **the Vinaya** (Mv 6.28.4/1:227, probably on an earlier occasion).

15.2.1.4 This orientation (a word which literally means “facing the east”) of **the Buddha’s manner of sitting** is also supported by the Commentaries.⁶⁵⁷ Various commentaries record the Bodhisattva as sitting down facing the east to eat Sujātā’s offering of milk-rice.⁶⁵⁸ (ApA 75). **Cūḷa Panthaka**, too, sits facing the east, when doing his famous meditation on “removing dirt” (*rajo’harāṇa*) from a piece of rag.⁶⁵⁹

The east, the direction of the rising sun, is clearly both practical and symbolic in terms of meditation. In a natural environment, the meditator sitting facing the east provides himself with the light and warmth of daybreak. The east symbolizes the start of day and the routing of dark by light, of the ridding of ignorance by the wisdom of awakening. Good monastics, as a rule, rise before dawn to welcome the light and warmth of day, the wisdom and compassion of awakening.

15.2.2 Spreading the grass

15.2.2.1 The Bodhisattva, having found that the eastern quarter was a suitable place for his meditation for the destruction of all defilements, grasped the grass (given by Sotthiya) [15.1.1] by the tips and scattered them. They divided as though by the weight of their tips.⁶⁶⁰ (BA 8,35-37) In other words, they spread out evenly for a comfortable seating.

15.2.2.2 Then, the Bodhisattva, thought: “I shall not give up this posture as long as I’ve not attained awakening.” He resolutely sat down cross-legged, determined on the fourfold energy⁶⁶¹ [15.2.2.3] with his back against the trunk of the Bodhi-tree, facing the east. (BA 8,6-8)

⁶⁵⁵ D 2,11/1:50 (SD 8.10).

⁶⁵⁶ D 16,1.22/2:95 (SD 9).

⁶⁵⁷ “Having prepared the Dharma-seat of the blessed lord Buddha facing the east in the middle of the pavilion” (*maṇḍapa,majjhe puratthâbhimukham buddhassa bhagavato āsanārahamaṃ dhamm’āsanaṃ paññāpetvā*, VA 1:11; DA 1:8; KhpA 95);

⁶⁵⁸ J 1:70, 71; ApA 75.

⁶⁵⁹ J 1:117; DhA 1:245 f.

⁶⁶⁰ BA 8,6-8; SnA 2:391,

⁶⁶¹ “The fourfold energy [effort]” (*catur-aṅga,viriya*), says the Comys, refers to the 4 lines of the *kāmaṃ taco ca* verse [15.2.3]. Alluded to at DA 2:458; MA 1:124,6, 2:183,19, 257,11+15+27, 3:194,25; SA 2:286, 3:109; AA 3:70; SnA 2:391; BA 8, 83, 133, 161, 172, 178, 190, 243; SAT:Be 2:385. Technically. These fourfold energy can also refer to the 4 right efforts (*sammā-p,paḍhāna*), but these are yet to be formulated.

mekhala, 150 yojanas high.⁶⁶⁵ He projected a thousand arms, each bearing a different kind of weapon. (SnA 2:391)

16.1.1.4 As Māra and his legion approached the Bodhi-tree, all the gods and non-humans who had gathered at the Bodhi-tree to honour the Bodhisattva—even Mahā Brahmā, Sakra, and the naga-king Mahākāla —disappeared in a flash back in the direction they had come from. The naga-king dove into the earth and fled to his naga-abode, Mañjerika, and lay down covering his face with both his hands. Sakra stood at the edge of the world dangling his conch-shell, Vijay'uttara, on his back. Mahā Brahmā left his white parasol on the world's edge and returned to the Brahma-world.

Not a single god or non-human remained. Suddenly, the Bodhisattva was all alone with only his 10 perfections (*pāramī*) as his sole protection. What followed was the most violent chapter in Buddhist mythology, that is, the assault of Māra and his legion on the meditating Bodhisattva under the Bodhi-tree.

16.1.2 Māra's attack

16.1.2.1 Then, Māra and his legion assailed the meditating Bodhisattva, shouting, “Seize him, kill him, destroy him!” Māra created various kinds of terrible rains as described in the commentary to **the Ājavaka Sutta** (Sn 1.10). He created **the 9 kinds of storms** (*nava vuṭṭhi*, literally “the 9 storm-showers”): a whirlwind, a torrential downpour, a rain of stones, a shower of weapons, a storm of burning coals, a shower of lava, a sandstorm, a mudstorm and blinding darkness.⁶⁶⁶

When the whirlwind—able to split mountains, uproot forests, trees and plants, and destroy buildings, whirling roof tiles about in the sky—reached the Blessed One, it hardly stirred the hem of his robe. The rains—whose impact could crack the earth itself—hardly wetted his robe even the size of a dew-drop. The stones—that could destroy great mountain peaks—turned into heavenly wreaths before him.

The shower of weapons fell as heavenly flowers before the Blessed One. The storm of burning coals, falling from the sky, fell as heavenly flowers at his feet. The storm of lava turned into sandalwood powder around him. The sandstorm turned into heavenly flowers; the mudstorm into heavenly incense; and the blinding darkness simply vanished as if in sunlight.

Even when Māra hurled his most fearsome weapon, the wheel-weapon (*cakk'āvudha*), at the Bodhisattva, reaching near him, it turned into a canopy of garlands and hovered over him, as he reflected on the 10 perfections that he had fulfilled. Māra's horde then hurled huge rocks at the Bodhisattva, but they turned into wreaths of garlands and fell to the ground like offerings before him.⁶⁶⁷

Finally, Māra and his demonic array noisily approached the Bodhisattva himself, as if to strike him. Like flies on a pure copper-ball, they were unable to even touch the Blessed One! This was on account of the Blessed One's boundless lovingkindness. (SnA 1:224-226)

⁶⁶⁵ *Di-y-aḍḍha, yojana, sata-p, pamāṇam* (SnA 2:391,26). The Jātaka Comy says that Māra's horde spreads 12 yojanas frontwards, 12 yojanas to the right and the left, and 12 yojanas to the back, and upwards to 9 yojanas, covering the whole world-sphere (ie, the sky) (J 1:71,31-33). A *yojana* is about 11.25 km (7 mi). It is difficult to imagine that Giri, mekhala is very much larger than the whole of Māra's horde, but JA confirms this (J 1:72,2). It is likely, however, that there are 2 kinds of yojana: the first is a unit of distance (prec); the second, a unit of height, ie, the length of an ancient Indian plough: about 1.8 m = 5.9 ft. By this 2nd yojana, Giri, mekhala would measure 240 m = 787.4 ft—which is a mythically more imaginable dimension.

⁶⁶⁶ *Navahi vāta, vassa, pāsāṇa, paharaṇ' aṅgāra, kukkula, vālikā, kalal' andha. kāra, vuṭṭhīhi* (SnA 224,34-225,1); and also *vāta, vassam paharaṇā vassam pāsāṇa, vassam puna aṅgāra, kukkula, vālikā kalal' andha, kāra, vuṭṭhīhi navahi* (BA 289,8-10).

⁶⁶⁷ The flying wheel-blade is also Sakra's weapon: see SD 36.10 (2.2.3).

16.1.2.2 Māra then struck his elephant on its earlobe with his diamond goad, and confronted the great man sitting alone under the Bodhi-tree, demanding, “Rise from your seat, master Siddhattha!”

The great man replied, “I will not rise, Māra!” Then, surveying Māra’s bannered army around him, the Blessed One uttered these verses recorded in **the (Sutta Nipāta) Padhāna Sutta** (Sn 3.2), thus:

Seeing an army arrayed all around,
I will go forth into battle—

That which cannot be conquered
that army of yours I shall break up with wisdom,

Having subdued my thoughts,
I will wander from country to country,

Māra, armed, on his war-mount,
Let him not shake me from my place!

by an army of the world with its devas—
like a stone breaks an unbaked pot.

and well established in mindfulness,
guiding a multitude of disciples.

(Sn 442-444), SD 51.11

16.2 Mother earth

16.2.1 Having heard the verses (Sn 442-444), Māra resignedly asks:

“Having seen such a spirit (*yaksha*),⁶⁶⁸ aren’t you afraid, monk?”

“No, Māra, I’m not afraid.”

“Why are you unafraid?”

“Because I have fulfilled the merits of the perfections (*pāramī*) such as giving and so on.”

“Who knows you have done such deeds?”

“What need is there for a witness here, Bad One? Even in a single life, when I was Vessantara,⁶⁶⁹ by virtue of my deeds of giving, this great earth quaked in six ways in witness.”

When this was said, **the great earth** as far as the waters’ edge (the horizon), trembled and made a terrifying sound. Hearing this, Māra was terrified, as if he had been struck by lightning. Dropping his banner, he fled with his horde.

16.2.2 The Jātaka Nidāna relates this dramatic climax of Māra’s assault on the Bodhisattva in some detail.⁶⁷⁰ The Bodhisattva then asked Māra, if he claimed the right of the Bodhi-seat, who was the witness to his deeds of generosity. Māra stretched forth his arm towards his horde: “All these are my witnesses!” His horde then connivingly echoed—sounding like an earthquake—that they were Māra’s witnesses.

Then, Māra cunningly counter-questioned the Bodhisattva,

“Siddhattha, who will testify to your having given in charity?”

The Bodhisattva replied:

“You have sentient beings (*sa,cetanā*) as witnesses to your having given in charity. Here, I have no living beings at all as my witnesses. Let alone the giving I have done in previous existences, let this great massive earth, non-sentient as it is, be my witness to the seven-hundredfold great alms I gave when I was born as Vessantara!”

16.2.3 Then, removing his hand from under the folds his robe, he touched **the earth**, saying:

“Are you or are you not the witness to my having given the seven hundredfold alms in my birth as Vessantara?”

⁶⁶⁸ Ce Ee Se *yakkho*; Be *pakkham*, “party; faction.”

⁶⁶⁹ This is **Vessantara J** (J 547) which highlights his perfection of giving.

⁶⁷⁰ J 1:71,27-74,33; BA 287,19-289,17.

The great earth resounded with a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand echoes, as if to drown Māra's horde, saying: "I was your witness to that (*ahan te tadā sakkhīti!*)!"

As the Bodhisattva reflected on the alms he had given as Vessantara, the elephant Giri, mekhala, 150 yojanas high, went down on its knees. Māra's horde then fled in all directions; no two fled by the same path, taking whatever path was before them, discarding their head-gear and clothes.⁶⁷¹

Māra and his legion had been routed by the Bodhisattva's own virtues. He was now ready to direct his mind to the attainment of Buddhahood.

16.2.4 The Bodhisattva's dramatic act of "**calling the earth to witness**" is one of the most inspiring of Buddhist myths. This myth evolved over the centuries and gains its most developed form in the Buddha legends⁶⁷² of SE Asia—especially in ch 9 of *Pathomsompho:d* (Pali, *Paṭhama,sambodhi*), a 16th-century Siamese (Thai) work by Somdet Paramanujit Jinarorasa.⁶⁷³ In Thai, Mother Earth is called *Nang Thorani*,⁶⁷⁴ "Lady Dharaṇī," "she who bears up or supports (all)" or *Phra Mae Thorani* (พระแม่ธรณี). She is also called *Sthāvarā* ("enduring") or *Vasundharā* ("treasure-bearer") in Sanskrit.

This is where we have the Buddha famously calling the earth to witness⁶⁷⁵ his numerous good deeds when he was challenged by Māra that he had no right to sit under the Bodhi tree. Then, follows the glorious epiphany of Mother Earth herself rising like a cosmic colossus out of the earth, and wringing torrents of water from the tips of her wet long hair, raising a deluge that washed away Marā and his legion, and so preparing the Bodhisattva for the great awakening.⁶⁷⁶

16.2.5 Evaluation

16.2.5.1 Māra's assault on the Bodhisattva under the Bodhi-tree makes an interesting analysis in terms of **a psychology of myth** or, more specifically, a psychology of the early Buddhist myth of the historical Bodhisattva [1.0.2.1]. There are both psychological and mythical aspects of the event and narrative—we may even venture to speak of it as a psychological event and a mythical narrative. A key question, then, is whether the "assault" actually happened? Or, what really happened? The short answer is that it is a mental event in the Bodhisattva's mind narrated using mythical symbolism and imagery. Let us look into the details and their significance.

Māra decided to launch his literally earth-shaking cosmic assault on the meditating Bodhisattva as soon as he made his "resolution of effort" to strive for awakening and his aspiration not to give up his striving no matter what the danger, even risking his own life. This was nothing less of **a heroic act** of spiritual striving, and considering the significance of the quest—that of full awakening—it is of *cosmic consequences*. His awakening and teaching the world will free it from worldliness. **Worldliness** here refers to all that is defined and delimited by our physical senses, symbolized by Māra.⁶⁷⁷

⁶⁷¹ (16.2.2+16.2.3): J 1:71,27-74,33; BA 287,19-289,17.

⁶⁷² OED def **legend** as "an unauthentic or non-historical story, esp one handed down by tradition from early times and popularly regarded as historical." In Buddhist teachings, a legend may be canonical or a local ethnic version or tradition of the life or account of the Buddha, a saint or related figure.

⁶⁷³ In fact, this episode was the work of Paramanujit. H Saddhatissa attr the work to Suvanṇaramsi (16th cent or earlier): *Pāli Literature of South-east Asia*, 1990:67. For a study of the Earth Deity in mainland SE Asia, see R Davis 1984 (esp 285); E Guthrie 2004 (esp 124-126); Akhbordin Rattana 2015 (esp 24).

⁶⁷⁴ In Thai, *thorani* (ธรณี) is a poetic word of "the earth, the ground."

⁶⁷⁵ The gesture of "touching the earth" is technically known as *bhūmi,sparśa,mudra*.

⁶⁷⁶ See SD 51.11 (3), esp (3.2.5.5).

⁶⁷⁷ On our senses and sense-experiences as constituting "the all" (*sabba*), see **Sabba S** (S 35.23), SD 7.1.

16.2.5.2 If we take **Mahā Brahmā** as the Jungian archetype of “the wise old man” [10.3.4] whose task is to ensure that truth and justice prevail in our lives—epitomized in his inviting the Buddha to teach the Dharma⁶⁷⁸—then, **Mother Earth** represents all our good past karma, the solid ground that we firmly stand, sit, walk and live on. She represents beauty (nature) and goodness. Together, both of them represent the “truth and beauty” of the Buddha Dharma.⁶⁷⁹

Brahmā resides in the heavens “above,” representing what is yet to be known or qualities to be cultivated, especially the divine abodes of love, ruth, joy and peace (traditionally called lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity).⁶⁸⁰ **Mother Earth**, on the other hand, is the ground “below,” representing the good we have done and our present goodness, especially moral virtue, that keeps us going rightly and happily. Hence, she can be said to be the archetype of “the nurturing kind woman.”⁶⁸¹

For this reason, of all the divinities, Mother Earth is perhaps the only one to be depicted in Buddhist art and iconography as standing *under* the Buddha’s “adamantine seat” (*vajr’āsana*). She is almost always depicted as wringing her body-length hair, from the tip of which torrents of water gush forth. The water represents all the “water of dedication” (*dakkhiṇ’odaka*) we have poured over countless lives after having made our offerings and doing charity for the good of others.

Interestingly, we can imagine **water** as symbolizing “merit” (*puñña*), the good we have cultivated by way of body and speech (such as keeping the precepts and practising charity)—this is the water that washes Māra and his legion away, and keeps them at bay. The **earth** symbolizes “wholesomeness” (*kusala*), which is our mental efforts and mind-heart to free itself from the limitations of the physical senses (from even body and speech). This is the power (wholesome karma through the 3 trainings)⁶⁸² that finally defeats Māra, by the attaining of awakening and nirvana.⁶⁸³

16.3 Māra as our shadow

16.3.1 Down but not out. **Māra** [9.1.2.3] might have lost a battle, even a few battles, with the Bodhisattva; but he is always at war with the Buddha. His ground of existence are the 5 physical senses and the unguarded mind. Although the minds of the Buddha and the arhats are well-cultivated and well-guarded, while they live with the remains of the 5 aggregates (form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness),⁶⁸⁴ Māra can still try to trouble them. He is like a storm or some natural disaster on the monitors of a weatherman—but he cannot in any way defile or distract them. The reason is that the Buddha and arhats are free from clinging (or more simply, from craving).⁶⁸⁵

Both Māra and the Buddha will only die a natural death, with the ending of their karmic life-span. Technically, the Buddha could have lived out his full lifespan, that is, 100 years or a little longer. Accord-

⁶⁷⁸ On Brahma’s inviting the Buddha to teach the Dharma, see **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,10), SD 1.11.

⁶⁷⁹ On Buddha Dharma as beauty and truth, see SD 40a.1 (8.1.2).

⁶⁸⁰ On the divine abodes, see **Brahma, vihara**, SD 38.5.

⁶⁸¹ Psychologically, we can also speak of ideal parents playing the roles of “the wise old man” and “the nurturing kind woman”—somewhat parallels of the Jungian notions of animus and anima. In other words, they are not gender-based roles but qualities to be cultivated and harmonized in a parent.

⁶⁸² On the 3 trainings (*sikkha-t, taya*), see **(Ti) Sikkhā S** (A 3.88), SD 24.10c; **Sīla samādhi paññā** SD 21.6; SD 1.11 (5).

⁶⁸³ Further on Māra as myth, see SD 51.11 (3).

⁶⁸⁴ The 5 physical senses (*pañc’indriya*)—the faculties of eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body—are found under “form” (*rūpa*). Māra also delights in “consciousness” (*viññāṇa*), but since the arhats (incl the Buddha) are without greed, hate or delusion, Māra has no real access to any of these aggregates. On the 5 aggregates, see SD 17.

⁶⁸⁵ On the 5 aggregates of clinging (*pañc’upādāna-k, khandha*) and the 5 aggregates (*pañca-k, khandha*), see **(Upādāna) Parivaṭṭa S** (S 22.56) SD 3.7 esp (6+7).

ing to the **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16), “the Blessed One, at the Cāpāla Shrine, mindfully and fully aware, relinquished his life-formation.”⁶⁸⁶

The Buddha, after teaching for 45 years, passed away mindfully and peacefully at the ripe old age of 80. He is unique in the history and mythology of religion as a person who chooses his own time, place and other conditions to be born [2.2] and does the same with his final moment, passing away into final nirvana.

Although an arhat, too, may choose his moment of passing away, he is unable to choose the specifics of his birth as the Bodhisattva does. The awakening of the arhat and that of the Buddha are, however, the same. This is a central teaching to be carefully noted, lest we fall into the wrong view of later sectarian teachings.⁶⁸⁷

16.3.2 The great distractor. Māra had been watching the Bodhisattva since his great renunciation, but failed to discourage him, much less to foil his efforts, even in the greatest battle between good and bad under the Bodhi-tree on the evening before the great awakening [17]. While the Bodhisattva would never give up his quest for awakening, his antagonist, Māra would *never* give up his quest to distract and dislodge us from our spiritual quest, or even when we are simply trying to do a good thing.

16.3.3 Māra’s opposite. Māra—as the true lord of all existence—is the metaphorical and mythical opposite of *atammayātā* (non-identification with the world). To say Māra is “metaphorical and mythical” does not mean that he is merely a poetic fancy: the effects of Māra upon us is as real as we are reading this. We are speaking of an enduring tendency and weakness in the human mind as long as we do not understand it and are rooted in greed, hate and delusion.

Māra, as such, tries his best to prevent us from turning away from the world and from his sway. Buddhist mythology recounts how Māra appeared before Siddhattha at the city gate as he left Kapila, -vatthu during the great departure, offering him the “wheel treasure” (a world empire),⁶⁸⁸ but the Bodhisattva turned him down. [9.1.2]

When persuasive offers failed, Māra made a final ditch to distract the Bodhisattva meditating under the Bodhi tree, attacking him with natural disasters, deadly missiles, blinding darkness and demonic forces. The Bodhisattva stood his ground, or rather remained seated in deep meditation. Despite the most fearsome threats from life’s darkest forces, the Bodhisattva refused to return to the world: his *atammayātā* remained strong as ever.⁶⁸⁹ [16.3.4]

16.3.4 Non-identification

16.3.4.1 As long as we are unawakened and dependent on our senses to know things and to express ourselves, we are caught in Māra’s realm (*māra,dheyya*).⁶⁹⁰ It’s just like when we use social media on the Internet. As long as we are on social media, we are under the power of those media, we empower and enrich them; we are invariably, even if tacitly, used and mined by them. We are under their power. [16.3.3]

However, there are ground-rules we can follow that can keep us at least temporarily or provisionally safe from the forces of Māra and the media market. The Bodhisattva was safe from Māra, even before becoming Buddha, by keeping to the rule of “non-identification” (*atam,mayatā*) [7.1.3.2]. In significant

⁶⁸⁶ D 16,3.10 + n + SD 9 (9.6) Did the Buddha commit suicide.

⁶⁸⁷ See esp **Sambuddha S** (S 22.58), SD 49.10.

⁶⁸⁸ The wheel imagery apparently refers to the circle of the horizon, alluding to territorial and worldly power.

⁶⁸⁹ SD 19.13 (6.1.5-6.1.6).

⁶⁹⁰ See **Māra,dheyya S** (U 3.1.10/50 f), SD 50.8.

ways, the Bodhisattva had a very good sense of *non-identification* which guided him on the right path of renunciation and on to Buddhahood.

16.3.4.2 Firstly, the Bodhisattva did not identify with himself by making the “resolution of effort” [15.2.2.2]. Basically, he declared to himself: “Even if this body were to be destroyed, I will not give up my quest.” The lesson here is that of not fearing to lose something desirable for something of even greater value. Hence, even when we have to give up connecting with social media, at least temporarily, we will happily do it for the sake of greater mental health and personal freedom.

Secondly, the Bodhisattva did not identify with things, with what he had: his loved ones, his realm, his power, or his wealth. He knew that these things would decay, become dysfunctional, be destroyed over time, and he had no control over them. He was ready to renounce them to go in quest of overcoming the causes of such losses. He was seeking what is beyond decay, disease and death. [7.2.1]

Thirdly, the Bodhisattva did not identify with his body. He was willing to leave behind all the worldly pleasures in quest of a higher pleasure that would not decay, become dysfunctional or be destroyed. He was looking for the bliss of nirvana, which he enjoyed in due course as the Buddha. [17.3.2]

Fourthly, he did not identify with the false. He tried whatever needed to be tried. He went to the two best teachers of the time and mastered *the highest levels of meditation* known to them [12.1.2]. Then, he spent 6 years of *self-mortification* [13.2.1] to see whether it would work. When none of these worked, he recalled his own blissful **dhyanic meditation** as a child [5.2]. This confirmed that he was right to give up self-mortification and to turn to the middle way.

Fifthly and finally, the Bodhisattva did not identify with the world. He was no more intoxicated with youth, health and life [7.1.3]. The world is ridden with decay, disease and death. It would be foolish when we were subject to decay, disease and death to go on seeking what was subject to decay, disease and death.⁶⁹¹

These 5 principles of non-identification can be found on a simple practical level in **the 5 precepts**, which reminds us of what are truly valuable to us so that we can live happily while working towards the path of awakening. These are the values of life, happiness, freedom, truth and wisdom, which respectively underlie the precepts against taking life, against taking the not-given, against violating others, against violating the truth, and against weakening or defiling the mind, the tool of awakening.⁶⁹² In other words, we do not identify with taking life, taking the not-given, sexual misconduct, falsehood and mental intoxication.⁶⁹³ [18.4.5.1]

16.3.5 The 7-year stalking

16.3.5.1 Despite his violent assault on the meditating Bodhisattva under the Bodhi-tree, Māra failed to stop him. However, despite being routed by Mother Earth herself, Māra did not give up his deadly mischief against the Buddha. He stalked the Buddha all his life, waiting for him to commit the slightest bad or even the smallest error of judgement in his actions. For 7 long years—during the 6 years of self-mortification and the first year of awakening—he had stalked the Buddha but failed to find any bad or lapse in his moral conduct.

16.3.5.2 Māra’s stalking the Buddha and his failure to find any fault with him is recorded in **the Satta Vassa Sutta** (S 4.24). The Sutta closes with these **verses of dejection** of Māra and conclusion:

⁶⁹¹ On the 2 kinds of quests, see **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,5-14), SD 1.11.

⁶⁹² On the 5 values and the precepts, see SD 1.5 (2) Table; SD 51.11 (2.2.4.3).

⁶⁹³ For a special essay on “non-identification,” see **Atammayātā** (SD 19.13).

<p>A crow circled a stone “Perhaps we shall find something tender there!</p> <p>Not getting anything tasty there, Just as the crow that assailed the rock,</p>	<p>that looked like a piece of fat, thinking: Perhaps, even something tasty!”</p> <p>the crow flew away from there. disgusted, we leave Gotama.</p>
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“Then, Māra, having uttered these verses of dejection, went away to a spot not far from the Blessed One, and sat down cross-legged, silent, dismayed, his shoulders drooping, hanging his head, downcast and bewildered, scratching the ground with a stick.” (S 4.24).⁶⁹⁴

16.4 THE NATURE OF MĀRA

16.4.1 Māra as our mental states

16.4.1.1 Although Māra was depicted as summoning all the forces of bad and evil throughout the world-system—we could say, “all the bad and evil there are”—to launch an unprecedented attack on the lone meditating Bodhisattva under the Bodhi-tree, no one was hurt at all! Certainly not the Bodhisattva. In fact, even the great flood that arose on account of Mother Earth’s appearance and wringing her long wet hair, we are only told that Māra and his legion were washed away. No one was actually killed or even hurt. In another version of the story, they simply scampered away in every direction. In probably less than an hour, the whole battle was over!

Clearly, **the Buddhist mythology of evil** defines evil quite differently from the religious or theological systems. In most religious or traditional views of “evil,” it is actually destructive or harmful, physically or mentally. In the theological view of “evil,” Māra is patently the antithesis of God and what he represents (usually some kind of power). A view of evil common to religion and theologies is that “evil” is anti-salvific: it either prevents salvation or it is the opposite of the state of grace as defined by that system.

16.4.1.2 We do not ever see Māra actually killing anyone or harming them in any way. As a rule, whenever Māra appears to a monk or a nun—Māra does not seem to appear to any lay people! When he does appear, he would either cloud up the renunciants’ minds,⁶⁹⁵ or try to strike fear in them,⁶⁹⁶ or to distract them from their meditation.⁶⁹⁷ Māra appears in the severest, most violent yet subtlest, forms before the Bodhisattva and the Buddha (that is, the same person before and after awakening).

From this overview, we can conclude that Māra, far from being an external being, functions, as a rule, as an internal or mental manifestation of our darkest forces—our “shadow”—that challenge or prevent our *mind* from seeing truth or the *heart* from feeling beauty. In this form, Māra is little more than the antithesis or opposite of **the Muses** in Greek mythology. The Muses are said to inspire the arts, literature

⁶⁹⁴ S 4.24,13/1:124 (SD 36.5).

⁶⁹⁵ In **Udumbarikā Sīha.nāda S** (D 25,24/3:56), Māra clouds the wanderers’ minds so that they do not respond to the Buddha’s teaching (SD 1.4); he clouds people’s minds so that they feel negative and do not offer alms to the Buddha (S 1:113; DhA 15.2/3:257 f). Ānanda fails to respond to the Buddha’s question whether he should remain “for the rest of the cycle (*kappa*)” because the former’s mind was “obsessed with Māra” (V 2:288). Māra attempts to contradict the deva Vetambari (S 1:66). Māra adds a sly remark (Sn 33) in the Buddha’s conversation with Dhaniya in **Dhaniya S** (Sn 1.2), SD 20.9 (SnA 44; cf J 1:231 f).

⁶⁹⁶ Cases of Māra trying to strike fear in others, esp in **Māra Saṃyutta** (S 4/1:103-127): appears as a fierce giant elephant before the Buddha (S 4.2); appears in various shapes in pitch darkness (S 4.3); appears as a giant serpent in the dark (S 4.6); shatters a huge boulder when it was drizzling in the dark (S 4.11).

⁶⁹⁷ Cases of Māra trying to distract a meditator: makes a loud noise to frighten the monk Samiddhi (S 4.22), SD 36.11.

and philosophy, or, more broadly, especially in the Buddhist sense, to inspire beauty in the service of truth.

16.4.1.3 In the case of the Bodhisattva, **Māra** invariably appears to him to discourage him from turning into *a world renunciant*, but to take the role of a world-monarch. Māra here symbolizes the world as power and control. Māra is the Supreme Collector and Keeper of the Status Quo (the way things are) who prevents anyone from leaving the world. If we see Māra as controlling our minds (our true and real creator), then, he is also the Supreme Lord of all creations (like the Para.nimmita,vasavatti devas, in whose heaven he dwells) [9.1.1.1].

Interestingly, Māra first appeared to the Bodhisattva outside the main gate of Kapilavatthu, just as he was leaving the city to renounce the world. Here, Māra seemed to want the Bodhisattva to *return* to his old ways with promise of world power. When the Bodhisattva was adamant in his quest, Māra promised that he would be watching him all the way for the slightest failure on the Bodhisattva's part.

16.4.2 Suddhodana as Māra

16.4.2.1 In a sense, Māra was present around the Bodhisattva since his birth—that is, in the person of **Suddhodana**, the Bodhisattva's father. Suddhodana started playing Māra's role when he realized that he would lose his son, Siddhattha. Since then, Suddhodana unwittingly played Māra's role with royal panache.

Suddhodana did not want Siddhattha to leave the palace. He wanted his son to be like him, to take over his role of power—it was as if he did not want Siddhattha to grow up, to become his own person. He certainly made every effort to prevent Siddhattha from seeing the 4 sights so that he did not renounce the world, thus going beyond his realm. Māra plays the very same role even now: he does not want us to leave his realm (*māra,dheyya*). [16.3.4.1]

In short, Māra is what *prevents us from growing up*, from individuating. On a spiritual level, Māra is anti-salvific, the antithesis of nirvana or what it stands for. Hence, we can see the narrative of the Bodhisattva as "a drama of freedom"—even as "**the drama of freedom**"—representing our struggle to break out of our old self, the shell of ignorance and conditioning, into the spacious universe of spiritual potential, of self-awakening and true freedom.

16.4.2.2 Those who have been victims of guru-cults will quite easily see **the cultish guru** or teacher as our personal Māra. He wants to keep us in his realm, and be just like him. He does this in the subtlest of ways so that we think that it is actually good for us. The guru is the centre of everything else in our universe.

His teachings only entrench us deeper into his life and we envision him as ever bigger than he really is—and we become ever smaller, until we are no more but mere appendages of the guru. Without him, we feel as if we are without meaning or purpose: we are nothing. This is **dependence**⁶⁹⁸ and **transference**⁶⁹⁹ at their psychological best.

The Buddha, on the other hand, looks up to the Dharma, and by his example, directs us to that Dharma. In other words, we are shown a path that has been taken by the Buddha himself, and now, inspired by him, we, too, walk that same path. It is the path of **individuation**: we become true individuals

⁶⁹⁸ "Dependence," mainly a reliance on another parent-figure or power-figure for emotional support. See SD 24.10b (2.4.1).

⁶⁹⁹ "Transference" is where an original emotion (such as the security of a parent-figure) is transferred to or is displaced by another, usu a parent-figure or power-figure, or even a counsellor. See SD 19.2a (2.5.2); SD 24.10b (2); SD 64.17 (3.1).

by way of righting our actions and speech, taming our mind, and freeing ourself by awakening to true reality.

16.4.2.3 Māra is most violent and overwhelming (comprising all the powers of bad and evil in the universe) when he confronts **the Bodhisattva** just before the great awakening. Near the dawn of the brightest light, Māra appears in his darkest. After his cosmic failure to stop the Bodhisattva, Māra (like someone getting elected a world-leader by a massive quirk) refuses to admit defeat, but continues to stalk **the Buddha**—this time, his ploys are subtler—he uses every opportunity to stop the Buddha from teaching and to invite him to enter into final nirvana.

In other words, as long as we are unawakened, Māra haunts us, especially when we are doing good: he wants us to stop, or at least to discourage us that all our wholesome efforts are really futile. In this sense, he is, to say the least, a cosmic wet blanket and snake in the grass of our own backyard.⁷⁰⁰

16.5 THE GODS

16.5.1 Throughout the Bodhisattva’s life—from his penultimate sojourn in Tusita up to the great awakening—the Commentaries tell us that the gods (the devas and the brahmas) and non-humans (nagas, suparnas and so on) [11.2.1.1 nn] were present, often singing his praises and scattering heavenly flowers, incense and so on. It was as if he were a divine being himself.

This might have been one of the reasons that spurred later Buddhist teachers and theologians to apotheosize the Buddha, see him as a divine being with various divine powers and characteristics that are not mentioned in the early Buddhist texts. Perhaps, they did not understand the mythic element in the Bodhisattva’s life, or perhaps they had been deeply influenced by outside theistic religions, such as the emergent Christianity on the eastern Mediterranean coast, well connected to India and China by the Silk Road.⁷⁰¹

Most Mahāyāna Buddhists view their Buddhas (even the historical Buddha, Gotama) and Bodhisattvas as cosmic God-like figures. They believe in some kind of eternal Buddhas or cosmic Bodhisattvas, and that they will go to some kind of Paradise (especially “Western Paradise”) after death. There are also cases where we can detect hints of the theistic influence upon some of our leading Buddhist teachers of the Theravāda today, such as in the way they do their puja.⁷⁰²

Psychologically, this clearly betrays a sense of insecurity (due to lack of clear insight into the Buddha Dharma) and the prevalence of childhood conditioning or Confucianist moral influence of deference towards the powerful or those perceived in terms of status and power. Their rationale seems to be: If we are unable to rid ourselves of these power-beings, we should worship them or at least be deferent to them. This is **the language and mind of Māra**.

16.5.2 When Māra appeared with his demon legion in battle array of cosmic dimensions ready to attack the lone Bodhisattva sitting in meditation under the Bodhi-tree, all the devas, brahmas and non-humans fled back to their heavens and abodes. They deserted the great being who was left quite alone like Mahā Brahmā in his empty mansion at the newly re-evolved universe.⁷⁰³ Despite the inability of Māra or any of

⁷⁰⁰ For a fuller study, see **Māra**, SD 61.8.

⁷⁰¹ This period—the Apostolic Age and the Ante-Nicean Age (1st cent-325 CE)—coincided with the rise of Mahāyāna in India and Central Asia. Thomas landed in Kerala in 52 CE, and Christianity was definitely established in India by the 3rd century. This is the period of the rise of Mahāyāna, which clearly was either influenced by Christianity or revised Buddhist doctrines in the face of this new challenge.

⁷⁰² See SD 40b.3 (3.1) n.

⁷⁰³ BA 288,20. See **Brahma, jāla S** (D 1,40/1:17), SD 25.2.

his demons to kill or hurt any of these gods, they fled. The non-humans fled for a good reason because they may be vulnerable to the powers of Māra and his legion.

However, we can only wonder why they left the Bodhisattva all alone to face Māra, just like the 5 monks left the Buddha, in due course, when he decided to take the middle way [13.2.2]. The reason is clear enough: they were not themselves awakened to understand the nature of Māra, whose fear and violence work within us with our own ignorance and craving. After all, the gods and non-humans were themselves a part of samsara, this cycle world of births and deaths, over which Māra rules.

Indeed, it would be more confusing and inexplicable if the gods and non-humans had shown their powers, as it were, to rout Māra, or even destroy him with their collective goodness. Such a turn of events would upset the whole Buddhist universe and reality—the presence of the Buddha would be no more meaningful or purposeful.

For, Māra as the epitome of our defilements (especially ignorance and craving), as the 5 aggregates, as karma-formations (the roots of our actions), as the deity, and as death—the 5 kinds of Māra—can only be overcome by the Buddha or the arhats. Even the highest Gods have their defilements, their aggregates, their formations, they are deities, and since they exist, they are also subject to death. To be caught in time is to serve time. The Buddha Dharma is time-free (*akālika*).⁷⁰⁴

17 The great awakening

17.1 OMNISCIENCE

17.1.1 The joyful prelude

17.1.1.1 Once the gods and non-humans of the 10,000 world-systems, hiding at the edge of the world,⁷⁰⁵ saw Māra and his legion taking flight, they each sent messengers back to their respective abodes announcing: “Māra has been defeated! Siddhattha has triumphed! Let us honour him in his victory!” Once again, they drew near the great being, and as they approached the Bodhi-seat, singing his praises.

Then, the gods stood there, honouring the Buddha with garlands, scents and ointments, and singing his praises in diverse ways. While the sun was still up (*dharamāne yeva suriya*), that is, just before sunset, the great being had dispersed Māra’s legion. As if honouring the Bodhisattva, even the Bodhi-tree shed its young leaves, letting them fall like shoots of red coral on his robe.

Then, his awakening process began. (J 1:75,1-23)

17.1.1.2 When Māra’s assault on the Bodhisattva began, all the gods and non-humans fled and left him utterly alone to face his demons, so to speak. This mythical reality is powerfully symbolic of the helplessness of even the highest of beings when facing their karma, as stated in the Dhammapada:

<i>Attanā’va katarāṃ pāpaṃ</i>		By oneself indeed is evil done,
<i>atta,jaṃ atta,sambhavaṃ</i>		born of oneself, produced by oneself.
<i>abhimanthati dummedhaṃ</i>		It grinds one of weak wisdom
<i>vajiraṃ v’amha,mayaṃ maṇiṃ</i>	(Dh 161)	as a diamond grinds a rock-gem.

⁷⁰⁴ On the 5 kinds of Māra, see **Sela S** (M 92,19 = Sn 561b = Tha 831b) n, SD 45.7a; SD 52.1 (9.1.2.2); **Māra** SD 61.8.

⁷⁰⁵ In terms of space science-fiction, we imagine that they must have retreated some light-years away in the outer quadrant of space, beyond the range of Māra’s weapons and detection.

<p><i>Attanā'va katarāṃ pāpaṃ attanā saṅkilissati attanā akatarāṃ pāpaṃ attanā va visujjhati suddhi asuddhi paccattarāṃ n'añña aññaṃ visodhaye</i></p>	(Dh 165)	<p>By oneself indeed is evil done, by oneself is one defiled. By oneself is evil not done, by oneself, indeed, is one purified. Purity and impurity are within oneself— no one can purify another.⁷⁰⁶</p>
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Even the gods and non-humans, by the very fact that they exist and commit good and bad, are under the sway of karma, no matter how long their lifespan may be, no matter how powerful they are. Notice that two mythical elements do not desert the Bodhisattva, that is, the Bodhi-tree that sheltered him and the earth that held him up.

Interestingly, we may say that the Bodhi-tree—or any tree under which we meditate or do good—represents our present good karma. The earth supports the trees, too, and symbolizes the accumulation of all our good karma which supports us in the face of Māra's challenges. These are all beautiful mythic images of self-reliance and the possibility of working out our own freedom and salvation.

17.1.2 The 3 knowledges

17.1.2.1 During the 1st watch of the night (6.00-10.00 pm), the Bodhisattva, emerging from his deep meditation, entered into the knowledge of his past existences, thus:⁷⁰⁷

“With his mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, unblemished, free of defects, pliant, malleable, steady and utterly unshakable,
 he directs and inclines it to **the knowledge of the recollection of past lives** (*pubbe,nivāsanānussati,-ñāṇa*).⁷⁰⁸ He recollects his manifold past existences, that is to say,
 1 birth, 2 births, 3 births, 4 births, 5 births, 10 births, 20 births, 30 births, 40 births, 50 births,
 100 births, 1000 births, 100,000 births,
 many aeons of cosmic contraction, many aeons of cosmic expansion,
 many aeons of cosmic contraction and expansion, thus:
 ‘There, I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance.
 Such was my food, such my experience of joy and pain, such the end of my life.
 Passing away from that state, I re-arose there.
 There, too, I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance.
 Such was my food, such my experience of joy and pain, such my life-span.
 Passing away from that state, I re-arose here.’
 Thus, brahmin, he recollects his manifold past lives in their modes and details.”⁷⁰⁹

(M 27,23/1:182), SD 40a.5

This is the power of recollecting his past lives which allows the Buddha to see how he has himself fared in the past leading up to his awakening. This knowledge helps him understand how a single life is often not enough for the untutored worldling to see true reality for himself. Even when we do see true

⁷⁰⁶ On the nature of prayer, see **(Pañcaka) It̐ha S** (A 5.43), SD 47.2.

⁷⁰⁷ This knowledge and the foll two (ie 4-6) constitutes “the 3 knowledges” (*te,vijjā*) of the Buddha and the arhats (D 3:220, 275; A 5:211), and is a shorthand for “the 6 knowledges” (*cha-!-ābhiñña*) listed here and elsewhere.

⁷⁰⁸ *Pubbe,nivāsanānussati,ñāṇa*, lit “the knowledge of the recollection of past abidings [existences].” The remainder of this is expanded into 4 sections in **Brahma,jāla S** (D 1.1.31-34/1:13-16 @ SD 25.3(76.3)) and 3 sections in **Sampasādaniya S** (D 27.15-17/3:107-112 @ SD 10.12). In both cases, each explains how the eternalist view arose.

⁷⁰⁹ This knowledge is detailed at Vism 13.13-71/411-423.

reality, we do not really understand its import, or we are distracted in other ways. Yet, when we keep on working on it, wisdom keeps growing within us.

This power also affirms the teaching of **rebirth**. But for those who lack such an experience or the faith in the Buddha's teaching, this vital aspect of the Buddha Dharma may be missing in their lives. For the wise in faith, this is not a difficulty when they see this at least as a provisional teaching in the spirit of the Buddha's wager, as laid out at the end of **the Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (A 3.65).⁷¹⁰

17.1.2.2 During the 2nd watch, the Bodhisattva purified his divine eye (*dibba,cakkhu*) or "knowledge of falling away and rebirth (of beings)" (*cutûpapāta ñāṇa*) or "knowledge of rebirth according to one's karma" (*yathā,kammûpaga ñāṇa*), thus:

"With his mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, unblemished, free of defects, pliant, malleable, steady and utterly unshakable,

he directs and inclines it to the knowledge of the passing away and re-arising of beings.⁷¹¹

He sees—by means of **the divine eye** [clairvoyance],⁷¹² purified and surpassing the human—beings passing away and re-arising, and

he knows how they are inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate, in the heavens, in the suffering states,

faring in accordance with their karma:

'These beings—who were endowed with evil conduct of body, speech, and mind, who reviled the noble ones, held wrong views and undertook actions under the influence of wrong views—after death, with the body's breaking up, have re-arisen in a plane of misery, an evil destination, a lower realm, in hell.

But these beings—who were endowed with good conduct of body, speech, and mind, who did not revile the noble ones, who held right views and undertook actions under the influence of right views—after death, with the body's breaking up, have reappeared in a happy destination, in heaven.'

Thus, brahmin, by means of the divine eye, he sees beings passing away and re-arising, and he knows how they are inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate, in the heavens, in the suffering states, faring in accordance with their karma."

(M 27,24/1:182), SD 40a.5

This knowledge allows the Buddha to see how we (and all beings) fare according to our karma (the good and bad we have done or not done). Both the teachings of rebirth and karma work in tandem, since our karma stays with us like a lightning rod, attracting the lightning whenever there is a moral storm. Good karma is like when the harmful effects of lightning are safely directed into the ground. We have noted how the earth represents all the Bodhisattva's past good karma [16.2.5.2].

17.1.2.3 During the 3rd watch, the Bodhisattva gained insight into **the knowledge of dependent arising** (*paṭicca,samuppāda*). He reflected on the 12-linked conditional relations, by way of dependent arising and dependent ending, in the direct and reverse orders,⁷¹³ in the tradition of all the buddhas, thus:

⁷¹⁰ **Kesa,puttiya S** (A 3.65,17-18) SD 35.4 (7.2); SD 51.5 (5.1.3.7).

⁷¹¹ *Cutûpapāta ñāṇa*, "the knowledge of the falling away and rebirth (of beings)," or "knowledge of rebirth according to karma" (*yathā,kammûpaga ñāṇa*), or "the divine eye" (*dibba,cakkhu*): see foll n.

⁷¹² *Dibba,cakkhu*, clairvoyance, not to be confused with the Dharma-eye (*dhamma,cakkhu*) (see n in §104). On the relationship of this knowledge to the 62 grounds for wrong views, see **Brahma,jāla S** (D 1) @ SD 25.3(76.3). See prec n.

<i>avijjā, paccayā</i>	<i>saṅkhārā</i>	with ignorance as condition, there are volitional formations;
<i>saṅkhāra, paccayā</i>	<i>viññāṇaṃ</i>	with volitional formations as condition, there is consciousness;
<i>viññāṇa, paccayā</i>	<i>nāma, rūpaṃ</i>	with consciousness as condition, there is name-and-form;
<i>nāma, rūpa, paccayā</i>	<i>saḷāyatanaṃ</i>	with name-and-form as condition, there are the 6 sense-bases;
<i>saḷāyatana, paccayā</i>	<i>phassa</i>	with the 6 sense-bases as condition, there is contact;
<i>phassa, paccayā</i>	<i>vedanā</i>	with contact as condition, there is feeling;
<i>vedanā, paccayā</i>	<i>taṇhā</i>	with feeling as condition, there is craving;
<i>taṇhā, paccayā</i>	<i>upādānaṃ</i>	with craving as condition, there is clinging;
<i>upādāna, paccayā</i>	<i>bhava</i>	with clinging as condition, there is existence;
<i>bhava, paccayā</i>	<i>jāti</i>	with existence as condition, there is birth;
<i>jāti, paccayā</i>	<i>jarā, maraṇaṃ</i>	with birth as condition there arise decay-and-death,
<i>soka, parideva, dukkha, -</i>		sorrow, lamentation, physical pain, mental pain and despair.
<i>domanass'upāyasā sambhavanti</i>		—Such is the arising of this whole mass of suffering.
<i>evam-etassa kevalassa dukkha-k, -</i>		
<i>khandhassa samudayo hoti</i>		

<i>avijjāya tveva asesa, virāga, nirodhā</i>	But with the utter fading away and ending of ignorance,
<i>saṅkhāra, nirodho</i>	volitional formations end;
<i>saṅkhāra, nirodhā viññāṇa, nirodho</i>	with the ending of volitional formations, consciousness ends;
<i>viññāṇa, nirodhā nāma, rūpa, nirodho</i>	with the ending of consciousness, name-and-form ends;
<i>nāma, rūpa, nirodhā saḷāyatana, nirodho</i>	with the ending of name-and-form, the 6 sense-bases end;
<i>saḷāyatana, nirodhā phassa, nirodho</i>	with the ending of the 6 sense-bases, contact ends;
<i>phassa, nirodhā vedanā, nirodho</i>	with the ending of contact, feeling ends;
<i>vedanā, nirodhā taṇhā, nirodho</i>	with the ending of feeling, craving ends;
<i>taṇhā, nirodhā upādāna, nirodho</i>	with the ending of craving, clinging ends;
<i>upādāna, nirodhā bhava, nirodho</i>	with the ending of clinging, existence ends;
<i>bhava, nirodhā jāti, nirodho</i>	with the ending of existence, birth ends;
<i>jāti, nirodhā jarā, maraṇaṃ</i>	with the ending of birth, there end decay-and-death,
<i>soka parideva, dukkha, -</i>	sorrow, lamentation, physical pain,
<i>domanass'upāyasā nirujjhanti</i>	mental pain and despair.
<i>evam-etassa kevalassa dukkha-k, -</i>	—Such is the ending of this whole mass of suffering.
<i>khandhassa nirodho hoti</i>	(S 12.1/2:1 f); (S 12.15/2:16 f), SD 6.13

As he continued to reflect on the nature of the 12 links of conditional relations, by way of dependent arising and dependent ending, in the direct and reverse orders, the 10,000 world-systems quaked 12 times to the very limits of the ocean.⁷¹⁴

17.2 COSMIC MIRACLES

17.2.1 When the great being attained awakening at Vesak dawn, all the 10,000 world-systems—the whole universe—resounded with joy and celebrated. The radiance of banners and streamers unfurled by the gods spread from the world's eastern fringe to its western fringe, from the northern fringe to its southern fringe. The surface of the earth was in constant contact with the Brahmā world.

Flowering plants and trees throughout the 10,000 world-systems blossomed forth. Fruit-bearing plants and trees bowed down heavy with fruits. Flowers bloomed on tree-trunks, branches and creepers.

⁷¹³ *Ath'assa dvādasa, padikaṃ paccay'ākāraṃ vaṭṭa, vivaṭṭa, vasena anuloma, paṭilomato samma, santassa samma, - santassa.*

⁷¹⁴ J 1:75, 22-26, 1; BA 289, 19-21.

The 10,000 world-systems themselves looked as beautiful as garlands and well-arranged banks of flowers. Even the dark intervening regions of space between the world-spheres shone forth together in a single mass of light with the radiance of 7 suns.

The waters of the mighty oceans of great depths turned sweet. Rivers remained still, as if out of respect for the great awakening. Those blind from birth were able to see; those deaf from birth were able to hear; and the crippled from birth were able to walk. Bonds and fetters broke loose and fell apart. All beings became free.⁷¹⁵

17.2.2 How do we, as story-tellers and narrators, tell the ancient Indian audience, without any mass media or digital media or the internet or the benefits of movie effects, the profound personal and cosmic significance of the Buddha's great awakening? We have to use all the miraculous language, limited only by our own imagination. If we today enjoy shows with special effects (FX) the grand displays and shows during special festive celebrations, then we can at once understand the amazement of the ancient Indian audience at such display and celebration of magical words.

Like many of us today, the ancient Indians, too, believed in all kinds of gods and non-humans. Some even think that these beings had power over their lives or were able to help them in their various difficulties. These miraculous stories and statements gently reminded them that we are all in the same boat, in the same world—the one ruled by Māra in all his 5 forms [9.1.2.3]. The gods are as helpless as we are.

But with the Buddha's awakening, all that will change. The power of the priests and preachers are not at all what they claim to be. Even the priests themselves are caught up in Māra's net. All who have greed, hate and delusion fall under Māra's power and influence.

The Buddha's awakening and teachings—when we understand and practise them—empower us to be our own refuge. When we understand and accept the Buddha Dharma, we become self-empowered, self-reliant, and free ourself from ignorance and craving. Without self as refuge, who else can our refuge be?

*Attā hi attano nātho
ko hi nātho paro siyā
attanā'va sudantena
nātham labhati dullabham*

The self is the master of the self;
for, who else could the master be?
With a self that is well-tamed, indeed,
one gains a master that is hard to find.

(Dh 160; cf 380)⁷¹⁶

[7.3 THE UDANA](#)

17.3.1 The Buddha,vaṃsa Commentary describes the meditation the Bodhisattva used that led him to directly gain awakening as follows. Using the breath meditation as the basis, he attained the 4 dhyanas. By increasing his insight, he kept to the path leading to the ending of suffering and abandoned all defilements, thus penetrating all the special qualities of the buddhas (BA 289,20-23).

By then, it was dawn, which he greeted with this **verse of uplift** (*udāna, gāthā*), his first awakened words:

*Aneka, jāti, saṃsāram
sandhāvissam anibbisam*⁷¹⁷

Through many a birth in this cycle of lives,
I've wandered (restlessly),

⁷¹⁵ J 1:75,21-76,20.

⁷¹⁶ See **The one true refuge**, SD 3.1 (3); SD 27.3 (3.1.1); **Spiritual friendship: A textual study**, SD 34.1(5.2).

⁷¹⁷ This is an amplified tr. Instead of *anibbisam*, Uv 31.6b reads *punaḥ punaḥ*, "again and again." Here, we take *anibbisam* as cognate of Skt *anivisaṃ* (cf SED: *anivisaṃāna*, "not retiring to rest, restless"). For details, see Dh:N 100 n153 & Levman 2014: 211-215.

*gaha, kārakaṃ gavesanto
dukkhā jāti punappunam*

seeking but never finding the house-builder.
Coming to birth again and again is suffering.

*Gaha, karaka diṭṭho'si
puna gehaṃ na kāhasi
sabbā te phāsukā bhaggā
gaha, kūṭaṃ visaṅkhitam
visaṅkhāra, gataṃ cittam
taṇhānam khayam ajjhagā*

O house-builder, you are seen!
You shall not build a house again!
All your rafters are broken
and your ridgepole shattered!
My mind has reached the unconditioned!⁷¹⁸
Craving's end has been attained! (Dh 153-154)⁷¹⁹

17.3.2 ⁷²⁰This verse is very interesting and important. First of all, it confirms the doctrine of rebirth. Secondly, it denies the Creator-idea. Thirdly, the fact of suffering is realized to be universal. All these are verified through personal experience.

The second part of the verse gives the first summary of the Buddha's teaching. First, there is the affirmation of his supreme discovery: "O house-builder, you are seen!" The term "**house-builder**" (*gaha, kāraka*) has two meanings: the Commentaries interpret it as "craving," but it can also be taken as the Creator (*issara, nimmāṇa*) idea.

The word "**house**" (*geha*) refers physically to this world itself, and spiritually to the cycle of rebirths (*saṃsāra*). The "**rafters**" (*phāsuka*) are the passions that make one cling on to this world. The "**ridge-pole**" (*gaha, kūṭa*) is ignorance, the cause of karma.

Finally, the Buddha announces his full self-awakening with the words "My mind has reached the unconditioned! Craving's end has been attained!" **The unconditioned** (*visaṅkhāra*) is a synonym for nirvana.

17.3.3 In the Vinaya, the Buddha compares his awakening to a **chick breaking out of its egg**:

"Brahmin, it is like a hen with 8 or 10 or 12 eggs on which she sat properly, properly warmed, properly hatched. Now, that chick which, having first of all pierced through the shell with the point of the claw on its foot, or with its beak, having emerged, is he to be called the eldest or the youngest?"

"He is to be called the eldest, master Gotama, for he is the eldest of them."

"Even so I, brahmin—having pierced through the shell of ignorance for the sake of beings moving in ignorance, egg-born, covered over—am unique in the world, awakened with the unsurpassed full awakening, I, brahmin, am alone the world's eldest and highest."

(V 3:3 f; cf D 2:15)

Here, the egg-shell represents ignorance, and the breaking out of the shell is our awakening to true reality. Once we have broken out of the egg of ignorance, surely, we have nothing more to do with its shell: we no more identify with the world—this is *atammayatā*. [7.1.3.2]

⁷¹⁸ Alt tr: "The mind has reached freedom from the conditioned."

⁷¹⁹ J 1:76,20-32; BA 289,23 f. The famous set of verses is found at Dh 153 f; Tha 183 f; J 1:756; BA 8; qu by VA 17, DA 16, KhpA 12, DhsA 18; and alluded to at UA 208. See V:H 4 Intro vii for further refs. Comys state that these verses are the Buddha's first words (DhA 3:127 f). From philological analyses of key terms, see Dh:N 100 nn 153 + 154.

⁷²⁰ The foll comy recurs at SD 19.13 (6.1.7).

III

AFTER THE BUDDHA18 Overview and conclusion18.1 RENUNCIATION AS THEME18.1.1 Small renunciations and great renunciation

18.1.1.1 If we are to summarize or characterize in a single word the whole of the miraculous life of Gotama Buddha, from the time of his sojourn in Tusita down to his great awakening, it is renunciation, or more simply, “letting-go” [8.2]. The whole narrative about **the miracle of renunciation**, about how he progressively let go of things of this world for the inner true reality so that finally he was liberated from the “outer” space to see the “inner space of peace and clarity” so that he was beyond space and time.

18.1.1.2 The key event of the whole miraculous life of the Bodhisattva, just before Gotama awakens as the Buddha, is that of **the great renunciation**, when he leaves the palace in quest of awakening [17]. It is called “the *great* renunciation” because it is the end-result of a series of connected “small renunciations” or stages of letting-go of his world, in quest for a better goal, indeed, the best goal. The quest ends in **the great awakening**—called “great” (*mahā*) because ever since the great renunciation, he is awakened in small but significant ways, a gradual awakening to ever greater reality. Now he is able to attain the vision and freedom of the highest reality—that of nirvana, which is beyond reality and unreality.

18.1.1.3 The miraculous life of the Bodhisattva begins with his happiness in Tusita, where the devas announced the time for his final rebirth into the human world. This brought about his renunciation of heavenly life—for the last time—never needing to return to any heaven any more, since he would, in due course, find true happiness and highest liberation.

The Bodhisattva was born into the best conditions for the final stages of his human evolution or individuation into “the foremost individual in the world” (*loke agga, puggalam*) [2.2.2.3]. This evolution began with the ending of biological evolution, the evolution of beings as a species, as a race, as the dichotomy of being men and women, of incompleteness ever seeking what seems lacking, a Platonian quest—in short, the problem of being human. [18.4.1.1]

18.1.1.4 Our study of the miraculous life of the Bodhisattva started with his being a deva, a divine being, who is conceived as a human. In either case—whether as a divine or a human being—he is still subject to the laws of nature—*he is impermanent, subject to change, subject to decay, disease and death*. His descent from Tusita, the heaven of the contented devas, was for the sake of seeking what is beyond decay, disease and death.

One effective way of seeing the existential state of all beings, divine, human or otherwise, is that it is incomplete, and, at best, it is in **the process of seeing and understanding true reality**, that is, the attaining of liberating wisdom. This, then, is a quest for goodness and fullness—this is what characterizes the noble eightfold path, whose limbs are said to be “right” (*sammā*) (because we grow spiritually on this journey), which is “good” (it makes us abandon all our defilements) and “full” (we overcome all our craving).

For the Bodhisattva, from his descent from Tusita to his awakening under the Bodhi-tree, then, is a **journey** on the path to awakening. This is the essence of the miraculous story of the Bodhisattva—a journey of renunciation, *the letting go of this world*, leading to the attaining of nirvana.

[18.2 THE HOUSE IMAGERY](#)

[18.2.1 The good house](#)

18.2.1.1 Another pervasive imagery that characterizes the miraculous life of the Bodhisattva is that of **the house**. Broadly, we can take this imagery to be that of “living space” or “supporting conditions,” which, as “**home**,” evokes a place of rest, security and thus comfort.

The range of Pali words for them—house or home—include *ālaya*, *āvāsa*, *nilaya* and *nivāsa*. We also have other “**house**” (a constructed abode) words such as *gaha*, *geha*, *ghara*, *nivesana* and *niketana*. “House,” as a dwelling or habitable place or physical structure, includes *agāra*, *nivesa*, *bhavana*, *pasāda*, *mandira*, *vimāna*, *vesma* and *sadana*. For monastic dwellings, we have *āvāsa*, *ārāma* and *vihāra*.

This impressive list of words testifies to the wealth of Pali words for “house” as “**living or habitable place**” that can accommodate a family, group of people, or even a single person. Also significant are words for non-physical dwelling-places or supports for the mind and existence, supportive spaces such as “**home**” (*oka*) and “**base**” (*āyatana*). There is also a range of Pali words for an abode for a single person, such as the Buddha or a forest practitioner, such as “**cell**” (*kuṭi*) and “**room**” (*gabbha*). However, this list more than serves our current purpose.

18.2.1.2 All these Pali words would apply to the miraculous life of the Bodhisattva. Our narrative, for example, began with the Bodhisattva in Tusita heaven, living in his own karmically constructed “**divine mansion**” (*vimāna*), which was like a portable living-space (or even “space-ship”) that moved around with him.

For 10 lunar months, Mahā Māyā’s **womb** (*gabbha*) was the Bodhisattva’s abode or tabernacle [2.7.4.1]. However, unlike normal humans, he was said to be fully developed, like a 6 or 7 year-old-child, even as a foetus (or like a newborn deva). This is the narrator’s way of informing us—after the fact (*vaticinium ex eventu*) [3.4.4]—that he was no ordinary child: he would be the Buddha. We can imagine—if we think of the Bodhisattva as a large foetus—that this might have necessitated his birth by way of a caesarean section, which brought on Māyā’s early demise [4.6].

18.2.1.3 The Bodhisattva was born in the exhilarating **natural space** of the Lumbinī park in spring (May-June), with the trees and plants in full bloom. This may be taken as a beautifully subtle hint of his Buddha-life in the space between renunciation and awakening. Siddhattha was born in the open under a sal tree; he meditated and reached awakening under a pipal-tree, henceforth respectfully referred to as the Bodhi tree; and he passed away into final nirvana under 2 sal trees (the kind of tree he was born under). And in between, he often dwelled and taught under a wide range of **trees**.

[18.2.2 Progressive evolution in terms of space](#)

18.2.2.1 Raised as a prominent Sakya chieftain’s son and heir, Siddhattha lived his Bodhisattva-life before the great renunciation in his father’s **residence** (*gaha*, *nivesa* or *bhavana*). From 16 until 29 years old, he dwelled in **3 palaces or mansions** (*pasāda*), one for each of the Indian seasons [6.1.1.1]. Towards the end of these “mansion” years, the Bodhisattva was introduced to the idea of a “houseless” (*anagāra*, *anagārika*) life from his seeing a “homeless one” or renunciant (*pabbājita*). In due course, he himself leaves the house-life (*agārika*) for **the houseless life of a renunciant** on the quest for the ending of decay, disease and death—which we know as “awakening” (*bodhi*).

18.2.2.2 The oldest Pali word for a monastic community-dwelling is probably “monastery-park” or simply “**park**” (*ārāma*, literally “delightful (place)”), which is a spacious natural forested area sprinkled

with well-spaced monastic cells (*kuṭi*) and halls (*sāla*) for common activities. Teachings were often given in the open. During the 4 months of the rains, the monastic community would resort to a sheltered rains-residence (*vass'āvāsa*).⁷²¹ The most famous of the early monasteries was “Anātha,piṇḍika’s monastery-park” (*anāthapiṇḍikassa ārāma*) outside Sāvattḥī. In later times, there were more structured and organized communities living in “monasteries” (*āvāsa*).⁷²²

18.2.2.3 In the miraculous life of the Bodhisattva, we see a **progressive change in his evolutionary space**. The change started with the Bodhisattva inhabiting the heavenly space of Tusita. This was followed by his conception when he occupied a biological space, that is, Mahā Māyā’s womb. He was born in the natural space of Lumbinī garden. Then, he was raised as a child in the human space of his father’s realm. As a child of 7, he experienced the contemplative or *spiritual* space of the 1st dhyana, which played a key role in his decision later to turn to the middle way [13.2.2].

On reaching 16, his father provided him with palatial space of the 3 mansions. When the Bodhisattva ventured into the natural space of the parks, he saw the 4 sights [7.2.1]. The first 3 sights evoked a sense of **crowdedness** in his life—he was psychologically stifled by the trauma of decay, disease and death—but the 4th sight (that of the renunciant) provides him with the hope of **spaciousness** that renunciation could bring.

Spurred by the 4 sights to seek for what is beyond decay, disease and death, he traversed the physical spaces of 3 countries [9.2.2]. He stopped at a river, crossed it, and on its *spacious* bank, cut off his hair and changed into the gear of a renunciant. He was back in natural space, where he spent most of the rest of his life. In the urban space of Rājagaha, he met with Bimbisāra. [11.2.1]

Then, he spent some months in the contemplative space of the ashrams of Āḷāra Kālāma and of Uddaka Rāmaputta. Then, for 6 years, he was back in natural space, practising various forms of self-mortification. Realizing the futility and danger of these austerities, he returned to the contemplative space of the breath meditation and dhyana, based on which he directed his mind to nirvana, which is beyond space and time.

18.3 CROWDEDNESS AND SPACE

18.3.1 The crowd and crowdedness

18.3.1.1 The Buddha, in his teachings, often characterized the world as being “crowded” both physically and mentally. Siddhattha surely saw the growing physical crowdedness encroaching on society. He must have noticed the effects of the 2nd urbanization [2.2.1.11], as hinted in this passage from **the Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta** (D 26):

Bhikshus, amongst humans whose life-span is 80,000 years, there will be 3 illnesses, that is, desire, lack of appetite, and ageing [decay].⁷²³

Bhikshus, amongst humans whose life-span is 80,000 years,⁷²⁴ this **Jambu,dīpa** [this country or world]⁷²⁵ will be powerful and prosperous, with villages, market-towns and capitals, no more than a chicken’s flight apart.⁷²⁶

⁷²¹ On *vass'āvāsa*, “rains retreat, rains-residence,” see SD 38.3 (1.2.1).

⁷²² For various imageries of the house, see Collins 1982:165-176.

⁷²³ *icchā anasanaṃ jarā*.

⁷²⁴ This is also the average human lifespan in the time of Vipassī Buddha: see **Mahā'padāna S** (D 14,1.7), SD 49.8.

⁷²⁵ *Jambu,dīpa* usu refers to the Indian subcontinent, ie, the “central continent” (V 5:3; D 2:167; Thī 498; A 1:227; Miln 3); but here (foll D:RD 3:72 n1) is prob a synecdoche for “this world” (*loka*), ie, the world of beings (*satta,loka*): on the 3 kinds of world, see **Rohitassa S** (S 2:26/1:61 f = A 4.45/2:47-49), SD 7.2.

Bhikshus, amongst humans whose life-span is 80,000 years, this Jambu,dīpa, will be crowded with people—it is Avīci,⁷²⁷ I say—just like a forest of reeds or a forest of rushes.

(D 26,23/2:75), SD 36.10

The realities of decay, disease and death have been with us since the birth of civilization, from the time when our ancestors began to live together as a functional tribe or society. Why is that these 3 realities troubled the Bodhisattva so profoundly?

Besides the actual crowding by a rise in population and crowded living spaces, we must imagine how the recurrence of aging, sickness and dying keep occurring in **a crowded society**—we see our loved ones, relatives, friends and those around us—growing old, falling sick and dying with such frequency that this would trouble the observant and insightful. The lifespan at the Bodhisattva’s time was only 100 years; hence, the impact of these truths must have struck him even more powerfully.⁷²⁸

18.3.1.2 Having found the way out of the crowd and crowdedness of the 2nd urbanization, the Buddha was well aware of how this must have affected his fellowmen still caught in the world. In **the Sāmañña,-phala Sutta** (D 2), the Buddha describes the crowdedness of house-life, thus:

“A householder or a householder’s son, hearing the Dharma, gains faith⁷²⁹ in the Tathagata and reflects thus:

‘The household life is stifling, a dusty path. The life of renunciation is like the open air. It is not easy living in a house to practise the holy life fully, in all its purity, like a polished conch-shell.

What if I were to shave off my hair and beard, put on the saffron robes, and go forth from the household life into homelessness?’” (D 2,41/1:62 f), SD 8.10

This is exactly what he has done—he has “gone forth from the household life into homelessness.” He has discovered freedom from the crowd and crowdedness of the world. His task was now to inform others of this way out of their misery.

18.3.2 Beyond the crowd

18.3.2.1 The Sambādh’okāsa Sutta (A 6.26) opens with the elder Mahā Kaccāna declaring the way out of the crowded cyclic life, “an opening in the confined,” thus:

“It is wonderful, avuso! It is marvellous, avuso!

How the attaining of ‘an opening’ (okāsa) in the confined (sambādha) [the space out of the crowd] has been discovered by the Blessed One, who knows, who sees, the arhat, the fully self-awakened one,

⁷²⁶ “No more than a chicken’s flight apart,” *kukkuṭa,sampātikā*, ie, close enough for a chicken to fly amongst them. Chickens, as we know, do not habitually fly. They may flutter, rise above the ground momentarily, and then fall helplessly hitting the ground backwards. Comy notes a possible vl as *kukkuṭa,sampādikā* (DA 3:855). This crowdedness hints at “conurbia,” where cities overlap one another.

⁷²⁷ **Avīci** (“uninterrupted”): see SD 36.10 (5.3).

⁷²⁸ On the problems of a crowded society, see SD 36.10 (5).

⁷²⁹ “Faith,” **saddhā**. There are 2 kinds of faith (*saddhā*): (1) “rootless faith” (*amūlaka,saddhā* = *amūlikā saddhā*), baseless or irrational faith, blind faith (M 2:170,21); (2) “faith with a good cause” (*ākāravati,saddhā*), faith founded on seeing (M 1:320,8 401,23); also called *avecca-p,pasāda* (S 12.41.11/2:69). “Wise faith” is syn with (2). *Amūlaka* = “not seen, not heard, not suspected” (V 2:243 3:163 & Comy). On faith, see SD 10.4 (2.2).

for the purification of beings, for overcoming sorrow and lamentation,
 for the disappearance of physical and mental pain,⁷³⁰
 for gaining the right way,⁷³¹
 for realizing nirvana—that is to say, the 6 bases⁷³² of recollection.⁷³³

(A 6.26,2/3:314), SD 15.6

18.3.2.2 The 6 bases of recollection, or, simply, **the 6 recollections** (*cha anussati*), are meditations that create inner spaces, helping us to move on in our mental cultivation and individual evolution. The 1st is the recollection of the Buddha (*buddhānussati*), which is a reflection on the ideal of human awakening, the goal and peak of individuation.

The 2nd is the recollection of the Dharma (*dhammānussati*), a reflection on the way we can and must ourselves take to reach that path and goal of individuation. The 3rd, the recollection of the sangha (*saṅghānussati*), is the envisioning of the wisdom, joy and freedom of those who have taken this noble path and reached the goal of awakening themselves, who are no different from the Buddha himself, only coming after him.⁷³⁴ These are the 3 jewels of early Buddhism, expressing the fundamental values intrinsic to the Buddha's teaching and its benefits.

The last 3 recollections—the 4th, the 5th and the 6th recollections—are 3 more alternative meditations that are helpful in freeing up space in our mental crowdedness, especially which affects our meditation. The 4th is the recollection of moral virtue (*sīlānussati*), that is, rejoicing in how we, at least temporarily, tame and refine our body and speech that allows such a space to arise in our lives. The 5th is the recollection of charity (*cāgānussati*) which, in simple terms, is our active role in appreciating the being of others, helping them have some space in their own lives.

18.3.2.3 The 6th, the recollection of deity (as an abstract state) (*devatānussati*), is the envisioning of our ability to attain beyond the limits of humanity, that is, *the space of superhumanity*, reminding us that the human state is capable of something greater than itself. We are reminded of how the Bodhisattva, despite his divinity or deity, renounces it to become human, so that he will be able to seek a way out of this divine space for nirvana, the unconditioned that is beyond space and time.

Deity (*devatā*) here is taken as an abstract noun (*deva + tā*, “godliness, divinity”) referring to:

- (1) what makes a being worthy of respect, honour and gifts (Nc 308), and
- (2) the godliness or potential for godliness—the ability to attain that divine space and beyond—in all beings, and, to a certain extent, the qualities in natural things, such as the 4 elements, to give and support life.

In short, it is a deep respect for **nature** as being an intrinsic part of our lives—an interbeing of the connectedness of all that live and exist—without which we would be deprived of life or the quality of life. In simple terms, this is a reflection on life, its value and the respect for it, and the goodness inherent in life.

18.3.2.4 On a mundane social level, the recollection of deity (*devatā'nussati*) encompasses how we, as practising Buddhists, can show respect to the practices or teachings of other systems or cultures—that

⁷³⁰ *Dukkha, domanassa*, sometimes tr as “pain and sadness.” See Walshe 1996 (D:W 589 n627). For a broader sense of *domanassa*, see §3 n on *abhijjhā, domanassa*.

⁷³¹ “For gaining the right way,” *ñāyassa adhiḡamāya*. See SD 15.6 (3.3).

⁷³² *Ṭhāna*, alt tr, “stations.”

⁷³³ *Cha anussati-ṭ, ṭhāna*: see SD 15.6 (1).

⁷³⁴ See **Sambuddha S** (S 22.58/3:65 f), SD 49.10.

is, in a “cultural” manner. For example, we may show our respectful presence in a Chinese festival or ritual, or even a popular event, for the sake of a wholesome connection with our family or community, without compromising our Dharma-based life.⁷³⁵

This is a kind of sociological understanding that such extra-Buddhist practices or teachings are manifestations of a greater reality that defines or humanizes that family, community or culture. While we are physically present in such an occasion, our mind remains reflective of the Dharma or lesson manifested in such events which we imbue with the spirit of lovingkindness, of unconditional acceptance of **godliness** (*devatā*) in others.⁷³⁶

18.3.2.5 In the miraculous life of the Bodhisattva, we see the presence of deity (the goodness within all beings and all things) being experienced by him or attending to him. The Bodhisattva’s miraculous journey began with his life as a deity (*deva*), a divine being, in Tusita. From his conception to his birth, various gods (devas and brahmas) and non-humans—moved by his deity (sense of goodness within)—participated in these earth-shaking events or were present as witnesses.

From the Bodhisattva’s birth to his renunciation, he lived with that deity (a state of divinity) latent in him. When he was left alone as a child, he was moved by this inner goodness to sit in meditation and enjoy the 1st dhyana. A story tells us that when he found a **swan** hurt by an arrow shot by his cousin, Devadatta, he nursed it back to life. When Devadatta claimed that the swan was his because he shot it, the Bodhisattva replied that since it was alive, it belonged to him—to ensure that the swan lived on.

18.3.2.6 Even as a youth in his prime in the 3 mansions, the Bodhisattva saw the impermanence, uncertainty and frivolity of sensual pleasures. It was in his nature, his sense of deity, that we were more than merely our body. We can call this a “lotus-like” deity, whereby he is in the world but not of the world: he was able to sense something was not right around him.

The 4 sights [7.2.1] revealed to him that he was still caught in the ways of the world, caught in the crowd of decay, disease and death—all signifying *lack of deity*—except in the last sight. The sight of **the renunciant** hinted to him that he had not realized *the fullness of his deity*, his inner goodness.

Almost at once, the Bodhisattva decided to leave the crowded world behind in quest of the deity that is liberation from the world, a liberation that surpassed even the highest gods themselves. While meditating under the Bodhi-tree, Māra, **the anti-deity**—the antithesis of all that is good in us, our godliness—challenged him, even threatened to destroy him, for daring to seek what was beyond humanity (and so going out of Māra’s reach).

Māra, it seemed, wanted all that deity—as **power**—for himself—to be the Almighty, the Supreme Being, the Overlord of all life and existence. On awakening, the Buddha is *freed from even deity* itself for what is much higher, beyond the dichotomy of humanity and deity. Hence, he is free from Māra. He is buddha, the fully self-awakened.

[18.3.3 Beyond space and time](#)

18.3.3.1 If we see the Bodhisattva’s progress from his descent from Tusita to the great awakening in terms of space, we must also see the same progress in terms of **time**. Naturally, whatever happens does

⁷³⁵ It is in this spirit that we should understand and respond to the Buddha’s teachings on making “offerings to the departed” (*dakkhiṇa*) (**Ṭhāna Putta S**, A 5.39, 2(5)), SD 4.1(1.3), and the “fivefold offerings” (*pañca, balī*), the last of which is to “deity” (*devatā, balī*) (**Ādiyā S**, A 5.41, 5e), SD 2.1 (2-3); **Patta Kamma S** (A 4.61, 12e), SD 37.12; SD 4.1 (4.1). Note here that the offering is to **devatā** (“deity, godliness”), not to devas.

⁷³⁶ On interfaith dialogue, see **Udumbarikā Sīha, nāda S** (D 25) + SD 1.4 (1.2). On missiology, see **Udumbarikā Sīha, nāda S** (D 25, 23), SD 1.4 (2); **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16) @ SD 9 App 1 (1); **Wanderers of today**, SD 24.6b (3); **The great commission**, SD 11.2 (6).

so *in* time; whatever happens is in itself a process of *change* that is growth, a spiritual evolution. The changes that the Bodhisattva went through were all steps that, in some way, brought him ever nearer to awakening.

The lifespan of the Tusita devas was 4000 celestial years. One celestial day equals 400 human years. If we calculate this in **human time**, thus—4000 x 400 years x 12 months x 30 days—we get 576,000,000 human years! [Table 9]. This is a very, very long time in earth years! Leaving all that behind, the Bodhisattva took a human birth which would last only 100 years, though his actual life lasted a full 80 years, during which time he taught for 45 years—more than half of that life.

18.3.3.2 In Buddhist cosmology, the celestial beings are not only long-lived, but they inhabit very vast expanses of space, and are able to travel at the speed of thought (which is imaginably faster than the speed of light). In other words, they are capable of teleportation (or “transportation,” in space fiction lingo). While the heavens are characterized by spaciousness, the other extreme of the Buddhist cosmos—**the hells**, especially the lowest of them, called Avīci—is the most crowded imaginable—and the lifespan of the hellbeings, unlike those of the celestial gods, are indeterminate. The hell-beings remain in their violent suffering state as long as their bad karma lasts.⁷³⁷

18.3.3.3 **Time** does not exist by itself, but in terms of **space**; hence, we speak of a time-space continuum. In other words, time and space are a continuum. In simple terms, we can say that they flow into one another as different currents of the same state or event. We can speak of space or we can speak of time: we are speaking of an aspect of the same phenomenon.⁷³⁸

Whatever exists must exist in time and space, which are a continuum. Hence, whatever exists must necessarily *change*: **existence is change**. Nothing can exist without changing. Hence, it is meaningless to speak of an eternal being or timeless essence that “exist.” In other words, “this world with its gods, its maras and its brahmas, this generation, with its recluses and brahmins, its rulers and people,”⁷³⁹ is a prison walled in by time and space.

Even the gods, no matter how astronomically long their lifespan may be, are still subject to time: they are impermanent. As a rule, even the gods (devas and brahmas), if they fail to continue doing good karma, but merely subsist on their past karma: they exist as if enjoying an extended holiday merely on their savings. Upon the exhaustion of that karma, they fall from their heavenly state and often head straight for the hellish states!⁷⁴⁰ Only when those beings who have attained the path of awakening, that is, are at least streamwinners, will they be free from the subhuman states.⁷⁴¹

In the case of the Bodhisattva, he fell (*cavati*, “he falls”) from the Tusita heaven and was conceived in Māyā’s womb because of the great store of past good karma. It may be said that due to his immense store of past karma and his present condition of being a spiritually good being, unrivalled by others during this epoch, he would naturally go on to become the Buddha. In this conditional sense, he can be said to be “destined” to become the Buddha.

⁷³⁷ On the crowdedness of Avīci, see SD 36.10 (5.3).

⁷³⁸ For a simple intro on space-time, see <https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Space-time>.

⁷³⁹ This is a very common stock, eg, D 2,40/1:62 (SD 8.10); M 92,2.3/2:103 (SD 45.7a); S 56.11,13/5:423 (SD 1.1); A 3.65,1.4/1:188 (SD 35.4a).

⁷⁴⁰ As in the ancient Indian game of “Snakes and ladders”: see SD 48.1 (6.3.1.5).

⁷⁴¹ See (**Nānā, karaṇa**) **Puggala S 1** (A 4.123/2:126-128) + SD 23.8a (1.1).

18.4 HUMANITY, DIVINITY AND SPIRITUALITY

18.4.1 Humanity

18.4.1.1 Even as a Bodhisattva, we see Siddhattha moving between his human state and the divine state. In fact, we see him right at the start of his miraculous life, enjoying the divine state in Tusita. He then assumed **the human state** as Māyā's child. However, even as a child of 7, he was able to attain **the 1st dhyana**, which is a transsensate state of the form world (*rūpa,loka*), which is cosmologically one of the high heavens.

Despite the Bodhisattva's divine roots—he was from Tusita heaven—it is his humanity that makes him buddha. In fact, from just before the great awakening, he was literally in touch with the earth, with humanity, represented by Mother Earth. She held him up through his lives as a Bodhisattva⁷⁴² and then stood witness to all his past perfections (*pāramī*)⁷⁴³ during that period.

We also know from the suttas and stories that the Bodhisattva's lives went back well before this earth had arisen. According to Buddhist cosmology, the universe goes through cycles of expansion, steady-state, collapse, and steady-state—a kind of pulsating universe. It is only during the post-expansion steady state that life exists in this universe.

We must assume then that when the universe re-emerges or re-evolves, we have a similar earth or earth-like planet arising. The unifying factor clearly is **Mother Earth** (the Buddhist Gaea or Gaia).⁷⁴⁴ Mother Earth is the ground on which the human race stands and flourishes. She is the good earth that stands firm, whom even the Buddha calls to bear witness to his past good in the face of Māra's challenge to prevent the fruiting of human evolution, that is, the Buddha's awakening.

18.4.1.2 Sudhdodana, in his efforts to prevent Siddhattha from renouncing the world, worked to find him a suitable mate [6.1.1.2]. To him, Siddhattha was incomplete as a person: he should have his “better half,” as it were. Plato, in his dialogue, *The Symposium*, has Aristophanes present a story about soulmates. Aristophanes states that humans originally had four arms, four legs, and a single head with two faces. Three genders: man, woman and the androgyne. Only androgyne had both sexes.

It is said that these humans had great strength and threatened to conquer the gods. The gods were forced to destroy the humans. Instead of destroying them with his terrible thunderbolt, Zeus came up with a creative solution. He split them all in half as punishment for their pride, and doubled the number of humans who would give tribute to the gods.

These split humans were in utter misery to the point where they would not eat and would perish. The god Apollo, out of pity, had them each sewn up and reconstituted their bodies: the navel was the only vestige to remind them of their original form. Each human then had only a single sex and half a body, as it were, and would forever long for his or her *other half*. It is said that when the fitting two find one other, there was a tacit understanding between them, and they found no greater joy than in unifying with one another.⁷⁴⁵

⁷⁴² Traditionally, he is said to have first aspired—as Sumedha [1.0(5)]—to become buddha before Dīpaṅkara Buddha: see SD 36.2 (1.2).

⁷⁴³ On the “perfections” (*pāramī*) of Siddhattha as *bodhisatta*, see SD 15.7 (2.4) (1) n.

⁷⁴⁴ In Greek mythology, Gaia or Gaea (poetical form of Gē, “land”) is the personification of the earth, and the ancestral mother of all beings. In Buddhist mythology, however, she is merely the earth personified since we view life as cognate with time, arising and evolving with time.

⁷⁴⁵ “The Internet Classics Archives: “*The Symposium* by Plato” (189c-193e).
<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/symposium.html>. See also <http://www.connellodonovan.com/hen.html>; [Spark Notes](#).

18.4.1.3 Siddhattha did not see in himself as missing any half, especially in terms of a sexual partner. Having just descended from Tusita in his previous life, it was easy for him to eschew human sexuality. Like the androgyne, he felt a total sense of completeness. His vision of the 4 sights [7.2.1], however, challenged his sense of completeness. The first 3 sights—decay, disease and death—filled him with a sense of deprivation and loss.

Only the 4th sight gave him a sense of inner peace, even joy—a sense of completeness. However, his father threatened to remove this completeness from him. As long as he was part of the family, he would never be complete, never be an individual. Only in leaving the family, turning away from the tribe, could he fully and truly be himself, a true individual. He had to leave the family, renounce the world.

On awakening as the Buddha, he discovers **the path to spiritual completeness** (*sammata*), **the noble eightfold path**, the way of the 8 limbs of rightness (*sammatta*), that is, the rightness of the body, in terms of moral virtue (right speech, right action and right livelihood); of the mind, in terms of mental concentration (right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration); and of wisdom (right view and right intention). This is the path of awakening leading to full knowledge and full freedom in all their rightness.

18.4.1.4 The completeness of Dharma practice in accordance with the Dharma can also be seen as the Buddha's key spiritual exercise—**breath meditation**. He practised it even as a child of 7, and again used it to gain full awakening. The breath, after all, is the fullness of humanity; it is our very life. The breath is not just one way, but both ways—in and out—this is the full breath. The ascetic Gotama tried to hold his breath, doing the breathingless meditation, which he did as part of his ascetic practices, but he learned firsthand that it did not bring any insight or awakening. [18.4.5.3]

When the breath is completely apprehended, we notice its characteristic rising and falling, the clear pattern of impermanence that brings **insight**. With insight, the mind understands itself, at peace with itself which brings profound bliss. This is the time when the physical breath has totally disappeared, and, in its place, is the brilliant inner light that points to the nirvana's door.⁷⁴⁶

The breath is our life, our human life, our humanity. To respect and regard the breath is to love life. The mindfulness of the breath, when properly practised fruits into the fullest appreciation of humanity and its potential for divinity and beyond—to **nirvana**.

18.4.2 Deity as divinity

18.4.2.1 If Mother Earth stands for the Buddha's humanity—or, we may even say that his humanity stands on and touches Mother Earth—then, Mahā Brahmā stands for **the Buddha's divinity**. He is inseparably connected with Brahmā.⁷⁴⁷ There are a number of brahmās and Mahā Brahmā (Great Brahma).

The best known Mahā Brahmā is **Ghaṭikāra**, who, in the time of Kassapa Buddha (the Buddha before Gotama) was the potter Ghatikāra, a bosom friend of the brahmin youth, Jotipāla (Gotama in that time). Even though Jotipāla at first shows no faith in the Buddha, Ghaṭikāra accepts him as he is, and does not give up on him. Ghaṭikāra even uses brute force—he catches Jotipāla by his topknot to bring him to the Buddha! Jotipāla then wisely realizes that Ghaṭikāra is really serious about the Buddha, and relents.

Ghaṭikāra acts out of boundless love or **lovingkindness** for his companion Jotipāla, seeing in him the potential for spiritual awakening. Ghaṭikāra himself, having to look after his blind parents, remains a celibate lay practitioner (a non-returner), is later reborn in the pure abodes as a non-returner brahma.⁷⁴⁸

⁷⁴⁶ On the mind's inner brightness, see **Cū'accharā S** (A 1.6,3-5), SD 2.13.

⁷⁴⁷ "Brahmā" with initial capital = Mahā Brahmā; lower-case "brahma" is a category of gods in the brahma realm.

⁷⁴⁸ (**Majjhima**) **Ghaṭikāra S** (M 81), SD 49.3.

18.4.2.2 Another famous Mahā Brahmā, called **Sahampati**, shows great **compassion** (*karuṇā*) to the world. While the newly awakened Buddha is reflecting on the profundity of the Dharma, Brahma worries that the Buddha may not teach the Dharma. Without hesitating, he appears before the Buddha to invite him to teach the Dharma. Brahmā Sahampati does not need to do this; it is in the nature of fully self-awakened buddhas to teach the Dharma. Sahampati’s enthusiasm reflects his compassion to act out of concern for the benefit of others whether they deserve it or not.⁷⁴⁹

Similarly, the Buddha does not need to teach the Dharma for our benefit. Notice that Māra tries to discourage him from renouncing the world, and from meditating to attain awakening. Failing that, Māra invites the awakened one, the Buddha, to at once pass away into nirvana since he has achieved his goal. But the Buddha compassionately declares that he will only do so when the fourfold assemblies of saints comprising monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen have been established. The Buddha teaches and works for 45 years to ensure that we still have the Buddha Dharma today.⁷⁵⁰

18.4.2.3 We have spoken of the brahmas’ lovingkindness and compassion—the first two of the 4 “**divine abodes**” (*brahma, vihāra*), the qualities that brahmas constantly dwell in, and which we can and must ourselves cultivate. These qualities greatly help in our practice of the Dharma, especially our meditation. The third divine abode is that of **gladness** (*muditā*).

In the miraculous life of Gotama, we see brahmas (both Mahā Brahmā and lesser brahmas) witnessing the key events of the Bodhisattva’s life. Mahā Brahmā himself received the new-born Bodhisattva [3.2]. He was present during the great renunciation [10], and Ghaṭikāra presented to him the renunciant’s 8 requisites [10.3]. He rejoiced in the presence of the newly awakened Buddha [7.2.1]. These were the times when Brahmā expressed his **gladness** (*muditā*) in the acts of the Bodhisattva and of the Buddha.

18.4.2.4 Brahmā’s **equanimity** is expressed in many ways, but despite his high divinity, he is still not awakened. Hence, when Māra rallied all the forces of evil and makes a final assault on the meditating Bodhisattva under the Bodhi-tree, Brahmā, along with all the other gods and non-humans fled, leaving the Buddha alone with his karma. The Bodhisattva’s good karma—embodied by Mother Earth—supported and protected him.

Equanimity (*upekkhā*) is the most difficult of the 4 divine abodes to master, much less, to express. It takes some humility to accept the fact that our powers to help others (or even help oneself) are limited. If we lack the wisdom or power to help others, then, it is wiser that we do nothing for the moment without actually giving up on others. Brahma is always there watching the Buddha, ready to present himself before the Buddha whenever the occasion deems fit. This also shows that the Buddha is amenable to requests for succour and to the wise advice of others.

18.4.3 Spirituality

18.4.3.1 Finally, we see **spirituality** or “Dharmaness” (*dharmatā*), the true nature of things, pervading the miraculous life of the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva’s spirituality was best expressed by way of his non-identifying to the challenges before him [16.3.4.2]. A first major example of the Bodhisattva’s “**non-identification**” (*atam, mayatā*) was seen in his not identifying with the festivities of the ploughing festival (which is, in fact, a fertility rite). Once he was left alone, he went into deep meditation and attained the 1st dhyana [5.2].

⁷⁴⁹ On Brahma Sahampati’s invitation to the Buddha to teach, see **Āyācana S** (S 6.1/1136-138) + SD 12.2 (2).

⁷⁵⁰ **Satta, vassa S** (S 4.24/1:122-124), SD 36.5; **Mahā, parinibbāna S** (D 16,3.7-8), SD 9.

18.4.3.2 When his father, Suddhodana, built him the 3 pleasure mansions, we saw that Siddhattha did not identify with the women or pleasures that the mansions provided. It was likely, too, that Suddhodana was effectively “flooding” Siddhattha with so much sensual pleasures, that he simply surfeited of it, and lost interest. It was possible that both flooding and non-identification worked together, ironically, fruiting in just the very result that Suddhodana was trying to prevent.

On the spiritual side, we know that Siddhattha was already destined (in a conditional sense) [18.3.3.3] to become Buddha. Whatever challenges he faced as a Bodhisattva were merely either incidental or a foil to him (to show him as being the better person). It was not that what presented itself before him was false, but rather it only affirmed that this was what he was looking for, what yet remained to be attained. As the Bodhisattva, he was on an irreversible quest for awakening.

18.4.4 Non-identification (again)

18.4.4.1 The 4 sights [7.2.1] played contrasting roles in the Bodhisattva’s mind. Clearly, he identified with all the 4 sights, but they were not all equal. Because he identified with *the first 3 sights*—signifying decay, disease and death—he was traumatized enough to seek their opposite: *what does not decay, does not become diseased, does not die*. But it is with joyful relief and hope that he identified with the 4th and last sight—the renunciant. This was the answer to overcoming what the previous 3 sights signified. This is what he sought for himself.

18.4.4.2 The best case of non-identification with the world was exemplified in the Bodhisattva’s **great renunciation**. *Non-identification* is a state of mind of seeing the world as it is—filled with decay, disease and death—and not wanting to have any part of it. Its action is that of moving away from the world [16.3.4], an act which is called **renunciation**, that is, letting it go, leaving it all behind.

What lies ahead was the quest for *the non-decaying, the non-diseasing, the non-dying*. This quest was expressed, in the case of the Bodhisattva, as seeking a great **space** between what kept him to the crowd of the 3 great evils and the “**opening**” (*okāsa*) [7.1.3.3], that is, the noble eightfold path leading to nirvana. The Bodhisattva had yet to fully understand this, but he was getting closer to it.

18.4.4.3 We must imagine that the Bodhisattva, even at this early unawakened stage, already had a good sense of “non-identification.” However, it was not clearly manifested in his mind. Hence, he only knew—we might even say that he only had a “gut feeling”—in the present moment of the event that what was wrong or right. He was not able to review it as being so. At best, it was only knowledge without understanding.

That was why the first 3 sights troubled him. He knew that they *are trouble* (the 1st noble truth). Maybe he only had some fleeting or vague idea how or why there is decay, disease and death (the 2nd noble truth). However, his understanding of the **meaning** of life was slowly becoming clearer. But he still needed to be clear of his **purpose**: to find the way out of this trouble, and to walk that path and reach its ending, nirvana.

18.4.5 The 2 extremes

18.4.5.1 During the space between his time with the 2 teachers and the great awakening, what prevented him from breaking through into nirvana was his lack of **full understanding** (*pariyatti*) of the nature of non-identification (*atam,mayatā*) [18.4.4]. After his awakening, he teaches us what this understanding

is. First of all, we need to understand and accept the fact that we are nothing more than the 5 aggregates—form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness: this is the “all” that we really are.⁷⁵¹

Next, we need to understand that it is the *identifying* with any of the 5 aggregates—or all of them, or imagining some “being” or “state” outside of them—that keeps us stuck in samsara and under Māra’s power. In short, we need to understand the threefold graspings (*ti,vidha gāha*) or “the 3 graspings,” that is to say we *identify* with the aggregates, or grasp at them, in these ways, as taught in **the Anatta,lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59), thus:

“Mine”	=	“This is mine”	(<i>etam mama</i>)	grasping that is craving	(<i>taṇhā,gāha</i>)	SD 19.3
“Me”	=	“This I am”	(<i>eso’ham asmi</i>)	grasping that is conceit	(<i>māna,gāha</i>)	SD 19.2a
“I”	=	“This is my self”	(<i>eso me attā</i>)	grasping that is wrong views	(<i>diṭṭhi,gāha</i>)	SD 19.1 (S 22.59/3:68), SD 1.2

Elsewhere, these 3 graspings are also known as the “**latent tendency of ‘I’-making, ‘mine’-making and conceit**” (*ahañ,kāra,mamañ,kāra,mānānusaya*).⁷⁵² These 3 graspings are the main factors behind mental conception (M 1) and mental proliferation (M 18). The wrong view of “**this is mine**” (*etam mama*), for example, arises as a result of grasping through craving (*taṇhā,gāha*), that is, we build up views and reinforce them through the false notion that there is something substantial and permanent called a “self,” “soul,” “identity,” etc.

This is the view that jams our meditation at some point. At best, we may feel some great ecstasy or rapture, but we don’t really have any idea *why* we are feeling so. So, we fall back onto some familiar dogma or view of an external agency (God) or eternal essence (Brahman) that must have caused it. But this is clearly not so.⁷⁵³ [16.3.4]

18.4.5.2 Since the Bodhisattva was still not sure of his way—of how to reach and walk the noble path—he had to follow a couple of trails familiar to the seekers and wanderers of his time. He first went to **the 2 teachers** [12], from whom he was able to master the last two stages of formless meditation: he attained the levels where the mind had “*nothing*” as its base, and where *the consciousness* was so subtle that it could neither be said to exist nor not exist. He was still unable to break through into the unconditioned, nirvana.

18.4.5.3 There were these two last “renunciations,” letting-go, that the Bodhisattva made. First, he went on to renounce his breath. He tried the “**breathless meditation**” (*apañṇaka jhāna*), which brought on various kinds of excruciating pains in his ears, in his head and in his belly⁷⁵⁴ [18.4.1.4]. This method only brought great pain, without any positive result. [13.2.1.1]

Then, he made the ultimate physical renunciation: he gave up taking food altogether and **starved himself**.⁷⁵⁵ He became so emaciated and weak⁷⁵⁶ that he did not even have the strength to answer

⁷⁵¹ This is an elaboration on the “all” teaching in **Sabba S** (S 35.24), SD 7.1.

⁷⁵² **M 22**,15/1:135,31 (SD 3.13), **M 112**,11+20/3:32,34 (SD 59.7); **S 21.2**/2:275,2, **S 28.1**/3:236,2 (SD 33.3), **S 35.69**-/4:41,7 (SD 71.6); **A 3.32**/1:132,25 (SD 31.8a), **A 3.33**/1:133,25 (SD 31.8b).

⁷⁵³ For a special study, see **The nature of identity**, SD 19.1, esp (1).

⁷⁵⁴ vl *appāṇaka* ~; Skt *alpa+āna* or *a+prāṇa* (the latter is preferred). See **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36), where it forms a part of the Bodhisattva’s self-mortifying practices (M 36,21-25/1:243,5 f), SD 49.4 (Mvst 2:124,9) = M 2:212,5 (MA 2:289,a); Lalv 250,14-20, 259,1*. This is *not* the normal dhyana: see SD 8.4 (3.1.4). For a more detailed analysis of the “breathless meditation,” see SD 49.4 (5.2).

⁷⁵⁵ On how he reduced his diet, see **Mahā Sīha,nāda S** (M 12,52-55/1:80), SD 49.1.

⁷⁵⁶ For a graphic description of the emaciated Bodhisattva, see **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,28-29/1:246 f), SD 49.4.

nature's call and fell on his face.⁷⁵⁷ One apocryphal account—probably from the Siamese work, the Pathama Sambodhi [13.2.2.2]—says that when he tried to go down to the river to wash himself, he was almost washed away. Fortunately, he had just enough strength to clamber back onto the bank and collapsed there. [Fig 13.2.2]

18.4.5.4 The Bodhisattva now realized that he had experimented with all the meditation methods available in his time, and none of them worked. In the last stage of his quest on the spiritual paths of his time, he was left with only one last option—**self-mortification**. If the answer lay not in mastery of *the mind*, he reasoned, it must be with the mastery over the body. The rationale seemed to be that the body was just as demanding as the mind for our attention.

While the mind comprises only thoughts, the body has 5 senses—the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body—demanding our attention 5 times over, as it were. To master the body, then, we have to deprive it of all its needs and wants. Indeed, some (like the Jains) believed, if during such a sense-deprivation exercise, we were to die, our “soul” was liberated from its prison of bones, flesh and blood, and we would attain the highest.

18.4.5.5 Self-mortification clearly is not for those who love sensual pleasures. This seems to be what the body can *give* us. So we are deluded into believing that this is the meaning and purpose of life—enjoying the present body because this is our only life, and when the body dies, everything in us and everything else die, too. We are stuck with this delusion, and that's all there is to it. This is, in essence, the dogma of **materialism**, rooted in the view of annihilationism (*uccheda, ditṭhi*).⁷⁵⁸

It is this lust for the body, our attachment to our physical senses—for what they can give us, it seems—that arouses in us the **fear** of losing the body. More exactly, we fear not being able to taste those bodily pleasures. Hence, asceticism is clearly out of the question in the minds of those who love sensual pleasures. The Bodhisattva, on the other hand, had had enough of sensual pleasures, and had almost total self-control over them. Hence, he had no fear of putting his body through the mill of self-mortification. [15.2.2.2]

18.4.5.6 There is another reason (a wrong one, though) for neither loving the body nor fearing to lose it. This is the effect of the notion that *this is not our real body* but that we have some kind of eternal self or we (our “soul”) are but a divine spark of the cosmic being or reality to which we will return when we are rid of our body-prison. The Buddha rejects such a fanciful notion of those who do not even understand what their views entail—they are rooted in the extreme view of **eternalism** (*sassata, ditṭhi*).⁷⁵⁹

18.4.6 Fearlessness

18.4.6.1 It is easy now to see that it is in the nature of the Bodhisattva, especially in his last birth, as he approaches closer to awakening, not to identify with either his life or his body. This **non-identification** [16.3.4] frees him of any *fear* of losing his body or life. Indeed, this is not difficult for him. For, even in a secular sense—he is of the warrior class (*khattiya*)—one who lives by honour and dies by honour, if it needs to. The spiritual quest only reinforces this courage and brings it to a higher selfless and spiritual level.

Hence, he has no fear of self-mortification, even if it would deprive him of his life. However, this will then be a useless death. Even a kshatriya does *not want* to die, but his death comes fearlessly and

⁷⁵⁷ **Mahā Sīha, nāda S** (M 12,52.5/1:80) + SD 49.1 (3.10).

⁷⁵⁸ On annihilationism, see (**Vaccha, gotta**) **Ānanda S** (S 44.10), SD 2.16(5) + (15); SD 40a.1 (7.2.2.2).

⁷⁵⁹ **Dhamma, cakka Pavattana S** (S 56.11,9.12), SD 1.1; SD 19.3 (2.2).

honourably from fighting with other warriors in an engagement that is not always in his power to stop. However, in a spiritual quest, we are free to choose when we reach a crossroads—to die or not to die—especially when there is nothing worth dying for. The quest has simply reached a dead-end.

The Bodhisattva chooses to live, so that he is able to return to the true path of the quest for the right goal. This decision takes more than courage: it needs **wisdom**. Wisdom means learning from past experiences and being able to relate causes and effects to understand conditionality. Indeed, the Bodhisattva now has a much better understanding of **conditionality**.

Our past karma brings us to where we are and affects our choices to some extent, but the present conditions—if we guide them with lovingkindness and wisdom—are able to make significant changes, allowing us to chart new courses in wholesome ways. In other words, the Bodhisattva is one who is good in reading conditions and working them to his spiritual benefit.

18.4.6.2 The final hurdle for the Bodhisattva in his miraculous life is **the assault by Māra and his legion** [16.1]. Again here, the Bodhisattva has no fear of Māra whatsoever simply because he (the Bodhisattva) neither identifies with his body nor his life [16.3.4]. Māra is Death personified—but the Bodhisattva has no fear of death at all. What we do not fear has no hold on us.

The miraculous life of the Bodhisattva is a story of **spiritual courage** [3.4.4]. It starts with the joyful courage to accept our responsibility to let go of even our divinity for the benefit of humanity. This is the great significance of the Bodhisattva descending from Tusita to take his final birth as a human. As a human, he has no fear to face whatever a human must face, whether pleasure (**the 3 mansions**) [6.1] or pain (**self-mortification**) [13.2]. When the Bodhisattva sees real challenges (**the first 3 sights**), he takes them up in the best way possible (**the 4th sight**) [7].

The Bodhisattva was not afraid to give up and leave behind all that he loved and had, if that sacrifice would waken him with the wisdom that there was really nothing in the first place to give up—nothing in this world is ours, anyway. When he understands this, he truly and fully awakens as the Buddha, the one, by his own wisdom and compassion, is able to show others the same noble path that he has himself taken.

18.4.6.3 For us, then, **the greatest miracle** is the quest for the true self, a quest that empowers us by our growing faith and understanding in the Dharma. This miracle begins with the signs of inner peace and clarity that point to our potential to go on this quest ourselves, by self-effort, for self-awakening, to final knowledge and true freedom.

Where ancient miraculous stories inspire fear and awe, inducing worship of the sacred and the saints, the miraculous story of Gotama Buddha moves us to *rejoice* in his efforts, to learn from them, to emulate them and act buddha-like. In this way, we will see the *humanity* and feel the *divinity* within us right here and now. With this as the bases for our practice, we rise beyond the self to awaken to true spirituality and freedom. Above all, the miraculous story of Gotama Buddha reminds us that the Buddha and the Dharma are still with us today.

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The most direct way to learn Buddhism is to read and live the Pali suttas which contain some of the oldest records we have of the Buddha's teachings. As we search these scriptures, we will discover ourselves amidst their stories, teachings and practices, and even take a first step towards spiritual awakening.

This series will also help you **learn and master the Pali Canon**: to locate suttas, teachings and stories, and have an idea of how Suttas are transmitted and translated. Wherever feasible, comparative studies are made between the Pali, Sanskrit and Chinese (Āgama) versions of the suttas. Although a very basic knowledge of Buddhism (the 5 Precepts, etc) is helpful, no knowledge of these languages is required for this course. This class is suitable for beginner and mid-range level.

The Sutta Discovery (SD) series started with **the NUS Buddhist Society** weekly Sutta Study Group (SSG) classes (February 2002 onwards), and **the Buddhist Fellowship** SD series (February 2003 onwards). The SD works are now freely available worldwide on <http://dharmafarer.org>. There is an on-going global team of volunteer **Sutta readers** who regularly study the suttas and essays, and proof-read them.

□ **PIYA TAN**, a former **Theravada monk** for 20 years, works full-time on the Suttas with new commentaries, and teaches them. As a full-time lay Dharma teacher, he specializes in early Buddhism. He was consultant and regular lecturer to the Buddhist Studies Team (BUDS) that successfully introduced **Buddhist Studies in Singapore Secondary Schools** in the 1980s, and then, invited as a visiting scholar to **the University of California at Berkeley, USA**. He has written many ground-breaking and educational books on Buddhism (such as *Total Buddhist Work*) and social surveys (such as *Buddhist Currents* and *Charisma in Buddhism*).

As a **full-time Dharma teacher**, he runs Sutta and related classes like the basic Pali course series, the Sutta Study Group (NUSBS), Dharma courses (the Singapore Buddhist Federation), Sutta Discovery classes (Buddhist Fellowship and elsewhere), and Sutta-based (including meditation) courses (The Minding Centre), besides his own full-time **Pali translation and research project**, the Pali House, and doing a comparative study of the Pali Nikāyas and the Chinese Āgamas. As a Theravāda monk, he learned insight meditation from **Mahasi Sayadaw** himself in the 1980s, and forest meditation from various forest monks. He has run numerous **meditation courses and retreats** for students and adults (including non-Buddhists) since 1980s. In 1992, he taught meditation at the University of California at Berkeley, USA, and also to BP, JPMorgan, the Defence Science Organization, GMO, HP and SIA. He writes weekly reflections and gives daily online teachings on Facebook. All this for the love of Dharma and of Ratna and their two sons.

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These new SD volumes appear once every 3 months. These volumes are fully studied at Poh Ming Tse (every 2nd & 4th Sundays), Singapore Buddhist Mission (every 3rd Sunday) and the The Minding Centre (every Wednesday, since 2006). By April 2018, Piya has completed more than 60 volumes of the Sutta Discovery. By 2030, over 100 SD volumes have been projected. **A Simplified SD (SSD) series** is also available online.



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